

Regeneración de pueblos históricos entre acciones materiales e inmateriales // Regeneration of historic hamlets between material and immaterial actions



Las actuales emergencias medioambientales, sanitarias y socioeconómicas han incrementado el debate sobre los vínculos entre la metrópoli y las zonas del interior, reconociendo en los pequeños pueblos históricos un nuevo atractivo. Lugares sometidos durante mucho tiempo a la despoblación y la marginación ven ahora la oportunidad de renacer mediante procesos de regeneración. Es un proceso complejo que requiere una alianza entre la ciudad, los asentamientos más pequeños y el territorio, con visiones a medio y largo plazo.. Este artículo examina tres casos distintos de regeneración de pueblos históricos en Italia (Piamonte, Liguria y Umbría). Colletta di Castelbianco, Ostana y Postignano son ejemplos en los que la arquitectura ha desempeñado un papel clave en la puesta en valor del patrimonio cultural y el paisaje. Proyectos en contextos diferentes que ponen de relieve elementos comunes y aportan elementos de reflexión para futuras intervenciones en otros pueblos. La búsqueda de la calidad y la justa medida en la arquitectura, el equilibrio entre tradición e innovación y el respeto por la relación con el paisaje son fundamentales. Sin embargo, las acciones materiales deben estar flanqueadas por acciones intangibles a través de proyectos integrados para activar procesos virtuosos en las dimensiones medioambiental, social y económica, contribuyendo al desarrollo de territorios y comunidades.

Pequeños pueblos históricos, proyectos regenerativos integrados, el papel de la arquitectura, renacimiento rural



The current environmental, health and socio-economic emergencies have increased the debate on the links between metropolises and inland areas, recognising a new attractiveness in small historic villages. Places that have long been subject to depopulation and marginalization, today see the opportunity to be reborn through regeneration processes. Is a complex process that requires an alliance between cities, smaller settlements and the territory, with medium- and long-term visions. This article examines three distinct cases of regeneration of historic villages in Italy (Piedmont, Liguria and Umbria). Colletta di Castelbianco, Ostana and Postignano are examples where architecture has played a key role in enhancing the cultural and landscape heritage. Projects in different contexts that highlight common elements and provide food for thought for future interventions in other villages. The search for quality and the right measure in architecture, the balance between tradition and innovation, respect for the relationship with the landscape are fundamental. However, material actions must be accompanied by immaterial actions through integrated projects to activate virtuous processes in the environmental, social and economic dimensions, contributing to the development of territories and communities.

Small historic villages, integrated regenerative projects, architecture's role, rural renaissance



Introduction

The current environmental, health and socio-economic emergencies have intensified the debate on the relationship between metropolises and inland areas, seeing a renewed attractiveness in small historic villages.

The same places that had suffered depopulation, also due to a process of marginalization characterized by a scarcity of infrastructures and services and the absence of labor supply, and sometimes by the occurrence of disasters, today see the epochal opportunity to be reborn, in a virtuous process of regeneration that could bring benefits on a large scale. The small historic villages, in Italy and in the European context, are therefore preparing to take on the connotation of places of opportunity. If brought into the condition of being able to respond to the contemporary needs of the stable and temporary community, they can be places of life in conditions of well-being, in contact with nature and traditions.

There is certainly a need for a new alliance between metropolitan and inland areas and regeneration projects with medium and long term visions that combine conservation and innovation. In the coming years, we will see a progressive relocation of parts of the population to high-altitude locations for long periods of the year. But to this end, plans for the future are needed, considering that territories, in order to be habitable, will have to be put in a position to produce economies, new forms of sociality and renewed cultures (De Rossi, 2020).

It is therefore necessary to ask ourselves at least about the concepts of: exodus from minor historic centers and the possibility of repopulation, relevance of tangible and intangible actions.

In this context, the question arises as to what role architecture is and to what extent it should intervene in fragile contexts. In fact, in certain areas to be safeguarded, an oversize could be deafening, as there is a code, written or not, to be known and respected (Lenci, 2022).

In the broad scenario that sees Italy as the protagonist of multiple interventions aimed at the regeneration and enhancement of small historic villages, this article takes as a reference three distinct cases, located in three different regions (Piedmont, Liguria and Umbria Regions) united by the fact that they have been subjected to revitalization initiatives in which the material of architecture has played a crucial role. Three different events, placed in different geographical and socio-economic contexts, which have had wide prominence in the scientific and media debate.

FIGURE 01 » Colletta di Castelbianco,
photo by Arbenganese



FIGURE 02 » Ostana,
photo by Silvia Paschetto



FIGURE 03 » Postignano,
photo by Grattet&Maglione





FIGURE 04 » Colletta di Castelbianco,
photo by Gregwilkins

Colletta di Castelbianco (Liguria Region, Province of Savona)

The historic village of Colletta di Castelbianco, dating back to the thirteenth century and located in the Ligurian hinterland of the province of Savona, is an example of an abandoned and recovered settlement. After the earthquake in 1887 it was abandoned by the entire population. In 1995, a group of entrepreneurs from Alessandria bought the village for two million euros through Sivim (Società Imprenditoriale Sviluppo Iniziative Immobiliari) with the intention of creating a telematic village and the project was entrusted to the architect Giancarlo De Carlo (Prescia, 2015; Camarda, 2021).

Due to the location of this place outside the main tourist flows, it was a place of solitude, and so according to the entrepreneur's idea it had to be a place for people called "white eagles". As De Carlo explained (2004) "White eagles" are individuals who prefer to work in solitude and seek isolation, but still use computers and electronic devices to stay connected to the world and direct tasks remotely. People tired of the city and interested in silence and contact with nature. At the time the project began, the "white eagles" were not very numerous in Italy. De Carlo began his design work by reading the urban fabric, noting that the open spaces had the same size and quality as the built spaces, without discontinuity, with streets and built-up spaces that interpenetrate each other and produce very intense situations. As the architect himself reported, the village was built with local stone: the same stone with which the walls of the olive terraces were made was the same one used to build the houses. The construction technique was not sophisticated, but precise, it allowed the construction of rectangular vaulted rooms, no more than four meters wide.

All the rooms of the building were vaulted and interpenetrated with each other and the roofs were flat, so as to be used to dry the materials obtained from the earth for agricultural production, such as grapes and olives.

De Carlo then went to track down the "code" in force in that place. Observing the village through the sections, he learned that the connections penetrated the volumes. When he began to design apartments from this congregation of spaces, he understood that connections were possible in all directions, horizontally, vertically and obliquely, and that everything could be connected if some dogmas normally linked to the composition of a floor were renounced. In the code of the place he found that the windows, although of different sizes, respected proportions. And all the houses were framed with plaster and white paint. In designing the new openings for the houses that needed more light, a scheme was followed, paying attention to cadence, rhythm, proportions and finishes, respecting the system of solids and voids dictated by the pre-existence. In a very respectful approach to the place, the totally added elements were the technological elements of the plant engineering.

De Carlo tackles the dilemma between camouflage or explicit interventions with a clear distinction: he surgically inserts the new houses into the existing plot of the village, respecting the shape of the building as revealed in the accurate studies on the pre-existing state. At the same time, he designed the new collective services such as parking lots, the new service road and the swimming pool, which are integrated at ground level as topographical architectures, studied in detail in relation to the orography (Cavallo, 2022).

The design approach is characterized by the ability to reinterpret the urban and architectural vocabulary in a harmonious way: the urban space and some originally private spaces become the continuation of external paths, as if they were alleys that wind inside the building. He elaborates compositional rules to make old and new dialogue without looking for special effects.

A peculiarity that made this reborn village attractive was undoubtedly the possibility of computer connection with the outside world. As Mario Cucinella reports, giving the example of Colletta di Castelbianco, anyone with a job that can be done remotely with a good connection can return to live in technologically infrastructural places (Berizzi, 2019).

On the other hand, the entire village of Colletta di Castelbianco, sometimes referred to as a cybervillage, has been wired with optical fibers, installing innovative systems in each of the approximately sixty apartments. This has allowed a revitalization of the village through advanced technological experimentation, transforming the village into a venue for telematic studies, frequented mainly by writers and researchers (Russo, et al., 2020). A telematic village whose slogan was "From the Stone to the Bits; Architecture and telecommunications" (Borghini, et al., 2013).

If from an architectural point of view, the restoration of the village is widely considered correct, irreproachable, some socio-economic observations have nevertheless been made related to the transfiguration of the original form of living the place and the actual repercussions on the territory (Cervellati, 2009). Although the initial intention to create an online community was then supplanted by the use of the housing units mainly as a holiday home, and partly as a widespread hotel, Colletta di Castelbianco remains a visionary project, which has sought a balance between historicity and contemporary needs, as well as a place that has hosted initiatives to protect cultural and environmental heritage (Scafuro, 2023).



FIGURE 05 » Ostana, Lou Pourtoun Cultural Center, interior view, photo by Silvia Paschetto



FIGURE 06-07 » Ostana, exterior views of the village, photo by Silvia Paschetto

Ostana (Piemonte Region, Province of Cuneo)

Ostana is the smallest municipality located in Valle Po, in the province of Cuneo, in Piedmont. Like many other municipalities in the Alps, there was a significant decrease in population during the 20th century to the larger centres in the valley below. A country that in 1921 had a population of over 1,200 people and that, towards the end of the last century, was reduced to only 6 permanent residents for the whole year. After decades of neglect and progressive degradation of the structures and the territory, the town began to react in the mid-80s, focusing on quality architecture and landscape as a means of reactivating the place and the community. In particular, the various administrations have implemented long-term projects focused on three fundamental pillars for the development of the territory: the promotion of Occitan culture, the adoption of a new model of tourism and the restoration and enhancement of the architectural and landscape heritage. In 2019, Ostana again had about fifty permanent residents, and mostly new children, which attracted media attention (Crotti, 2016, 2019).

Also since the 1980s, various interventions have been carried out to recover local architecture, especially for private homes, using materials and techniques typical of the place. These interventions followed strict rules, creating sensitivity among the population and helping to restore a rural architectural landscape. In recent years, during the stabilization process of the Ostana community, various public facilities have been built, thanks to European, national and regional funding for local development. Such architectural spaces for collective or social use are essential to promote community well-being.

This village is an example of how it is possible to build a community through the combination of tangible and intangible actions, composed of architectural quality and programming of cultural, artistic and tourist activities. This methodology is based on knowledge of local history, as well as creativity and patience (Valcanover, 2020).

An architectural intervention that has had a positive impact on the community is represented by the multifunctional cultural center "Lou Pourtoun" built in 2015, designed by Antonio De Rossi, Massimo Crotti and Marie-Pierre Forsans. A building that manages to dialogue harmoniously with its surroundings, in terms of material and compositional choices, through a contemporary reinterpretation of a traditional typology (Redazione Domus, 2016).

Principles that are not dissociated from the compositional approach that the community of Ostana attributes to the local architect Renato Maurino who in the 80s and 90s designed well-calibrated interventions for the reuse of the architectural heritage while respecting the surroundings, but above all he developed a sort of normalized vocabulary, halfway between the construction tradition of the place and the experience of Alpine designers such as Edoardo Gellner. The work of the architect Murino is therefore considered fundamental in the process of redevelopment and revitalization of the town, then continued by professors of the Polytechnic of Turin, and which has led Ostana itself to be recognized as a laboratory of alpine architecture (Comune di Ostana; De Rossi, 2018). The approach that is adopted today in this Alpine village can be defined as "adaptive reuse", which does not seek to adapt ancient buildings to contemporary housing models, but rather focuses on the specificity and materiality of pre-existing structures. The goal is to preserve the historical legacy as much as possible, without sacrificing the contemporaneity of life and some technological innovations. A minimalist and essential approach prevails, aimed at preserving and enhancing the elements inherited from history (De Rossi, 2022).

The story of this Alpine town was also highlighted as part of the 2018 Architecture Biennale, at the Italian Pavilion curated by Mario Cucinella with Arcipelago Italia, where the case of Ostana was narrated as an effective reaction against depopulation processes (Cucinella, 2018; Redazione Domus, 2018).



FIGURE 08 » Postignano,
photo by Grattet&Maglione

Postignano, Sellano (Umbria Region, Province of Perugia)

Postignano is a fortified medieval village built on a slope along the Apennine ridge in the Valnerina area, in the municipality of Sellano, in the province of Perugia. The settlement has a triangular shape with a hexagonal watchtower, which occupies the top upstream and from which the perimeter walls depart, within which the typical "tower-houses" stand, forming a dense and compact settlement. The fortified complex, which originally had the function of controlling and protecting the road between Spoleto, Norcia and Foligno, experienced centuries of economic splendour, thanks to the flourishing agricultural and forestry activities and the craftsmanship of iron and hemp, in 1600 it had about 500 inhabitants. The village then experienced a gradual depopulation due to emigration to the cities, until it was completely abandoned in 1966, due to a landslide that made the houses uninhabitable. In addition, the area was hit by an earthquake in 1979. In the same year, the American architect and photographer Norman Carver had chosen Postignano as the cover image for his book 'Italian Hilltowns' and defined it as the archetype of Italian hilltowns (Proietti, 2013; Bianconi, et al., 2018; Maticena, 2022). For many years, the houses of the small Apennine town remained empty, further aggravating the state of abandonment in which the village was already located, characterized by evident degradation (Berizzi, et al., 2019).

Since 1992, the houses in the village have been progressively acquired by the architects Gennaro Maticena and Matteo Scaramella, through the company Mirto Srl. Between 1992 and 1994, almost 300 purchase contracts were signed with the former inhabitants or their heirs. In 1997 the first restoration works were started, but the process was interrupted due to the earthquake of 14

October 1997, which caused serious damage to the village. Between 2007 and 2013, the restoration work was carried out under the supervision of the Superintendence of Cultural and Landscape Heritage. These works have confirmed the original subdivision into sixty different housing units; The few collapsed buildings were rebuilt using fallen stones, ensuring complete respect for the original appearance of the village, through an exemplary restoration intervention (Redazione IoArch, 2015). Some of the houses have been transformed into spaces for permanent or temporary exhibitions, a cafeteria, a reception, a restaurant, a shop selling local products and a wine shop. About fifty real estate units have been allocated to residential purposes: some have been purchased and others converted into widespread accommodation facilities. The methodology applied in the restoration work followed a sober and rigorous approach, aiming at the philological restitution of the existing and the safety of the centuries-old structures. The testimonies of the former owners have become useful complementary elements to the architectural survey. During the interventions, carried out following the anti-seismic and landscape regulations in force, it was also possible to bring to light the colors and finishes buried under the patina of time. Inside the church of S. Lorenzo located in the village, a cycle of frescoes from the 1600s, found following the earthquake of 1997, has also been restored (Fressoia, 2018; Berizzi, et al., 2019). It should be noted that following the 2016 earthquake in central Italy, no appreciable damage was found in Postignano (D'Avino, 2019).

As can be seen from all of the above, from an architectural and engineering point of view, the intervention is impeccable; As far as the social aspect of the inhabiting community is concerned, it is observed that it is a fragile balance that will have to be able to reinvent itself in order to last and be sustainable (Pizzi, et al., 2022). Although the recovery of Postignano has been undertaken with an economic perspective, with the aim of recovering the capital invested through sales and tourist hospitality, it is important to highlight that there is an offer of activities open to all: during the period from May to October, there is a wide calendar of cultural events, such as concerts, book presentations, conferences and various events. Fifty meters downstream from the center there is a small building that houses a swimming pool and a spa. In 2018 there were 17 employees in Postignano, some of whom lived in the village with their families. After more than 60 years, two children were born there, highlighting a return to life and vitality of the community (Fressoia, 2018).

Conclusion

The three initiatives for the recovery and regeneration of the historic villages of Colletta di Castelbianco, Ostanta and Postignano represent significant cases of how architecture can be used as a lever for the protection and promotion of the cultural and landscape heritage and, if combined with integrated intangible actions, can trigger processes of revitalization of places in a phase of abandonment.

The design approaches adopted on the built heritage, which differ according to the specific contexts and the sensitivity of the designers, have had undoubtedly positive feedback, which has tended to be confirmed by both specialized critics and public opinion. Both in cases of reinterpretation of urban and architectural vocabulary, in adaptive reuse with contemporary integrations, and in the more conservative case by adopting a philological restoration, the common thread can be traced

can be traced in the identification of a code and in its strict respect. A code that derives from a very careful reading of the context and from the search for values and traditions to be expressed and handed down, always in balance with the landscape context. This doesn't mean giving up on innovation, but it does mean finding the right measure. It is clear that, in the absence of the will and ability to produce architectural quality, probably the three cases described here today would be ghost towns, which would be added to the list of regrets for the loss of heritage. Therefore, the subject of architecture, of the search for quality, is fundamental. It is also clear that the integration of technology and new performance standards in terms of safety, habitability and comfort are essential to adapt ancient places to the renewed needs of society. Moreover, the necessary role of spaces intended for public use emerges, which are also able to accommodate activities and initiatives of various kinds.

It is true, in fact, that material actions alone are not enough to create community: we need integrated projects consisting of physical and intangible actions, conducted with a multidisciplinary approach, capable of triggering virtuous processes that contribute to the socio-economic well-being of the place in its territorial system. To promote widespread welfare in a sustainable way, a form of community involvement in the area and a vision that can look beyond the village walls seems important.

Among the other levers that have characterized the three projects described above, it can be observed that the technological aspect and IT connections, which today is essential and present in many cases, as far as Colletta is concerned has become a fundamental asset ahead of its time. Ostana, on the other hand, has leveraged the enhancement and patrimonialization of local cultures and resources, thanks to the synergy between inhabitants, associations and local institutions. Postignano has found its leverage in the cultural, historical and artistic heritage. All three cases are set in contexts of extraordinary naturalistic value, and are attractive to those looking for solutions far from the frenetic mechanisms of the big city, as well as to those who have roots, a bond, with those territories.

Through these cases, it can also be found that good processes can be triggered by private or private entrepreneurial initiatives with public contribution or by small collective gestures linked in such a way as to stimulate institutions.

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