

# **CULTURAL RESILIENCE: PHYSICAL ARTIFACTS, INTANGIBLE ATTRIBUTES, NATURAL RISKS**

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# Architecture and Territory. The Resilience of Fragile Italy

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## Abstract

*Italy is a fragile country with a high seismic and hydrogeological risk. The peninsula is experiencing a period of demographic and economic crisis and the central administration tends to concentrate more on large cities. This paper aims at mapping the Italian territory and identifying macro-trends, notably those relating to less safe areas that have suffered the phenomenon of abandonment. Such mapping may lead to important strategic and informed decisions on the interventions that may need to be taken in order to repopulate specific areas, increase security or revert to other actions. Starting from a storytelling of risk and abundance, minor areas meet two different trends: on the one hand, repopulation, where accessibility requirements in case of seismic and hydrogeological risk can be guaranteed; on the other hand, renaturalisation and securing of the territory. The possibility of reviving abandoned places involves strategic decisions and a series of good practices based on expert knowledge on the area. An example of such revival are those villages that are transformed into a forge of ideas, home to cultural and artistic centres that also become tourist destinations. Bringing cultural revival to forgotten and abandoned places can be an instrument of urban and territorial regeneration. Renaturalisation and culture as regenerative devices can become tools for the transformation of the territory, the city and its architecture and assume priority importance in the processes of planning and design of the territory, considering the positive impact they can have on the quality of life and on social processes.*

**Key words:** Natural Risk, Regeneration, Resilience, Renaturalisation, Climate change.

## Demographic and economic crisis

Italy is experiencing a period of severe crisis both from a demographic and economic point of view. In 2018, the country witnessed the worst demographic decline in the last hundred years.<sup>1</sup> The population resident in Italy decreased by 124,427 units in 2018, marking a -0.2%; as of January 1, 2019, 60,359,546 people were resident in Italy, 8.7% of whom were foreigners. The decrease in births is more than 18 thousand units compared to 2017, 439,747 children have been entered in the registry office for birth, a new historical minimum since the Unification of Italy. The decrease in the number of foreigners registered, mainly due to the decrease in the number of foreign immigrants, is - 3.2 %; there were 332,324 foreigners registered, more than 11,000 fewer than the previous year. These figures carry with them a series of possible negative consequences that cannot be ignored. Demographic changes are characterised by a sharp fall in birth rates, an ageing population and a loss of residents. The population of the last twenty years has grown only because of the number of foreigners. Without the implementation of

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<sup>1</sup> National demographic balance year 2018. [www.istat.it/it/files//2019/07/Statistica-report-Bilancio-demografico-2018.pdf](http://www.istat.it/it/files//2019/07/Statistica-report-Bilancio-demografico-2018.pdf) 2 Regional forecasts of the resident population as of 2065. [www.istat.it/it/files//2018/05/previsioni\\_demografiche.pdf](http://www.istat.it/it/files//2018/05/previsioni_demografiche.pdf)

appropriate intervention measures to counter this negative trend, the impact on economic growth will be severe.

From the point of view of economic growth, the outlook for 2019 is not the best. Gross domestic product is expected to grow by 0,3 % in real terms, which is a decisive slowdown compared to the previous year. A deceleration in production rates is expected, which would have a negative impact on the labour market, leading to an increase in the unemployment rate. The political situation at both national and international level is contributing negatively by creating uncertainty in the financial markets with negative consequences for the economy at global level. A negative economic situation makes its weight felt more in the disadvantaged areas, in the so-called smaller centres. Due to the lack of services, infrastructures and job offers, some parts of the territory are constantly being abandoned in favour of large metropolitan centres where we find greater opportunities for the new generations. In addition to the migration of the new generations to foreign countries, we should not underestimate the phenomenon of migration within the national territory, which is growing continuously as confirmed by the forecasts for future years. A shift in the weight of the population from the South to the Centre-North of the country is expected in the years to come. In 2065 the Centre-North would welcome 71% of residents against 66% of today; the South instead would welcome 29% against 34% at present.<sup>2</sup>

### **Exposure to risk and fragility of the territory**

The World Economic Forum recently published the fourteenth edition of the Global Risk Report, based on a survey of experts and decision-makers from various sectors of the global economy on the perception of risks at the international level. The main global risks remain linked to environmental issues, representing 5 of the top 10 global risks in terms of both probability of occurrence and impact: in particular, climate disasters are still the main risk in terms of probability.

Starting from the analysis and study of risk is a choice dictated by the desire to take as a reference the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN Agenda 2030. Among the sustainability objectives of the Goal n.11 Sustainable Cities and Communities, the theme of environmental disasters emerges in Target 11.5 “Reducing the adverse effects of natural disasters. By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially reduce direct economic losses related to global gross domestic product caused by disasters, including water-related disasters, with particular attention to the protection of the poor and people in vulnerable situations.

Going down to a national scale, the Italian territory is also at high environmental risk, at seismic and hydrogeological level. The risk is a danger that can be quantified through a probabilistic approach that relates the danger or the probability that a certain event produces damage, to the negative effects that such an event produces. It is of fundamental importance to consider the ability to respond to

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<sup>2</sup> Regional forecasts of the resident population in 2065. [www.istat.it/it/files//2018/05/previsioni\\_demografiche.pdf](http://www.istat.it/it/files//2018/05/previsioni_demografiche.pdf)

the risk. If we think, for example, of an earthquake, we have two possibilities: on the one hand, the securing of the territory and the construction of earthquake-proof buildings to be less vulnerable; on the other hand, to generate a phenomenon of migration of populations from dangerous places, to reduce exposure to the danger itself. Both directions are viable but require a reasoning that leads to the evaluation of the many social and economic aspects that the two choices could change. These issues are treated today in Italy with two very different attitudes, the desire to want to make everything safe and at the same time the attitude of standing still waiting for a catastrophic event to occur and then treat the post-tragedy in an emotional way. The first position is difficult to follow because the current demographic shortage and the scenario that is expected in the coming years do not justify a similar choice, together with the problem of scarce economic resources. This stalemate can be tackled in a different way with a hypothesis that places itself in an intermediate position: the idea is to provide a critical and realistic vision, to arrive at choices. The theme is to decide on which portions of the territory to intervene with the safety and on which instead to apply new tools that recall issues such as housing, densification and renaturation, which in particular finds a positive response from the environmental, ecological and tourism.

### **Climate change**

Climate change is already underway and will go on: temperatures are rising, precipitation patterns are changing, ice and snow are melting and average sea levels are rising globally. It is very likely that warming is, for the most part, due to increased concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. To mitigate climate change, we need to reduce or avoid these emissions.

When analysing the situation of smaller centres, we need to take into account the role they can play in the future. The rise in temperatures will necessarily lead to a shift in arable areas, which will inevitably have to rise in altitude, moving from the plain to the hills or mountains. The rise in sea level will cause the disappearance of a large flat area and the consequent revaluation of those parts of the territory that today continue to suffer inexorably from the phenomenon of abandonment. The portions of land now considered at the margins will necessarily have to be re-evaluated with the support of institutions.

### **Minor areas**

The analysis phase starts with a careful mapping of the Italian territory, carried out through the use of a GIS (Geographic Information System) software that allows to merge data from different sources in a single project of territorial analysis. Starting from a storytelling of risk and abundance, minor areas are defined. An interesting fact is represented by the connection between the risk level of the territory and the abandoned villages: it is evident how often the areas with the highest seismic and hydrogeological risk, following the occurrence of a catastrophic event, are abandoned by the population in favour of safer areas. A second phase of the

research has been focused on abandoned villages. The cultural and landscape riches abandoned in Italy are numerous and often are not adequately exploited. Until the Second World War, the villages were the backbone of the demographic distribution, until a slow depopulation, generated by many factors, caused its decline.<sup>3</sup>

All this set of minor centres constitutes a series of singularities that must be explored, known and protected as they constitute the current geography of the Italian territory. Because of its fragility, the Italian territory needs a policy of decentralization and enhancement of this small fabric overshadowed by large urban centres.

The regeneration of abandoned villages and smaller areas is a widespread project of small works, which together can increase the resilience of fragile Italy.

### **Re-naturalizing**

Renaturalisation and securing of the territory, with the ultimate aim of guaranteeing a higher environmental quality of the landscape, represent a valid alternative for those parts of the territory where securing and restocking are not sustainable, in economic and demographic terms. Renaturalisation represents a method of safety and green transformation of the territory, the city and its architecture. It thus becomes an instrument of priority importance in the processes of planning and design of the territory, given the positive impact it can have on the quality of life and on social processes.

In a key of regeneration of urban and extra-urban environments, the use of the forest as an architectural and technological element is a tool of fundamental importance for the sustainable design of the environmental system at all its scales. In carrying out this operation, ecosystem services have been taken into account, as well as the multiple benefits that plants are able to provide to the environment and society: control of solar radiation, biological control, carbon capture, acoustic and air quality improvement, protection of soil and slope stability, protection from landslides and rockfalls, reduction of flood risk, a long series of factors that can ensure greater accessibility to the territory from an environmental, ecological and tourist point of view.

It is a question of applying forms of controlled abandonment of the territory, in order to restore a certain balance between the humanized environment and nature. It is not possible to think of letting nature run its course without any form of management. In the mountains, the forest is constantly growing and without adequate control, its continuous development would lead to an increase in the level of danger. In the lowlands, however, over the centuries we have seen an important phenomenon of deforestation and it would be important to plant new trees to try to compensate for this lack. We need to ensure that nature regains its space but in a controlled way to ensure the conservation of biodiversity. New lowland forests, new green areas in the mountains, parks and green areas managed and controlled so as to make them accessible and usable as tourist and leisure areas. From abandoned and

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<sup>3</sup> M. Bassanelli, *Geographies of abandonment. The case of Valle di Zeri*, (Milano: 2010, degree thesis available on Issuu).



unsafe areas to places that find a new destination of use, becoming safe and usable environments for everyone.

## **Repopular**

Within the wider spectrum of smaller areas, in those identified as safe, the idea is to intervene by transforming the heterogeneous abandoned material into a complex commercial housing device that responds to the differentiated needs of all social subjects: new residences better equipped and new places for work. The most recent attitude is that of wanting to rediscover these realities, re-appropriating these places and reliving their traditions in a new, proactive perspective. From the collection of some experiences, it has been possible to highlight the causes of abandonment, the state of the art of the village and the strategies of requalification and revitalization for these assets. To cite a few examples, we find Badolato in Calabria, a small village that is re-inhabited; Riace that turns into a place of welcome for migrants; Portis in Friuli Venezia Giulia that becomes an educational village, home of the Serm Academy, a place of experimentation for seismic phenomena; Paraloup in Piedmont that turns into a tourist centre; Solomeo in Umbria that becomes the headquarters and production of an important textile company. These are just a few examples of the attempts that we find on the Italian territory. It is therefore important to make an assessment of the effectiveness of these interventions, to obtain models to be proposed in different places when possible. The aim is also to create a methodological approach for the safety of abandoned ancient villages in reference to the seismic risk. Repopulate: create places that allow to live in an inclusive way, ensuring an independent and autonomous life to all people, especially those with health problems or disabilities.

The process of repopulating rural areas can become an opportunity to apply the model of the green economy, based on a sustainable use of resources and the reduction of environmental and social impacts, to improve the quality of life. In a framework of sustainable development, abandoned villages can assume a role of priority importance at national level but it is necessary to create new organizational and functional models, create rules of collective heritage management to ensure the development of these smaller areas. The experiences of some villages are good practices that can be taken from the regulations, starting from the territory through concrete action projects that become models at national level to govern the territory through the environment. The numerous successful experiences can find their maximum value by becoming replicable examples, concrete responses to the economic, social and environmental crisis.

## **Culture as a regenerative tool**

In the broader scenario of rehousing, the interventions that have as their ultimate goal the dissemination of culture find a position of particular importance. Compared to the large metropolitan cities, which tend to conform to each other, the smaller towns constitute a large collection of beautiful, authentic places that preserve a

diversity in economic, social, spatial organization and cultural. On the international scene, the launch of the New Urban Agenda, the “shared vision for a better and more sustainable future” adopted by the United Nations Habitat III Conference with which culture was integrated into the international urban development agenda, is important. “Culture and cultural diversity are sources of enrichment for humanity and make an important contribution to the sustainable development of the city, human settlements and citizens [...]. The New Agenda recognises that culture must underpin the promotion and implementation of new models of sustainable consumption and production that contribute to the responsible use of resources and address the negative effects of climate change”.<sup>4</sup> Culture becomes a real catalyst for smaller towns as an opportunity for future development. The ECoC experience in particular accelerates the phenomenon of urban regeneration of smaller centres through the culture tool. While a long and slow process is needed to revitalise a small centre under normal conditions, all these mechanisms and phenomena are becoming more effective with the same resources invested in the area, thanks to the theme of culture in a European key. These experiences can be models to be reproduced on a smaller scale also in other centres spread throughout the territory.

## Conclusion

Starting from an analysis of the demographic and economic crisis combined with the study of risks to obtain a set of data as a basis for mapping the Italian territory. To obtain a series of maps that become guiding elements in the identification of marginal areas. To highlight some born cases of experience in the field of regeneration and reuse of abandoned villages. An example are the villages reused as a forge of ideas, home to cultural and artistic centres that also become tourist destinations. Bringing culture to forgotten and abandoned minor places can be an instrument of urban and territorial regeneration. Renaturalisation and culture as regenerative devices can become tools for the transformation of the territory, of the city and its architectures, assuming priority importance in the processes of planning and design of the territory, considering the positive impact they can have on the quality of life and on social processes.

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