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Regenerating the small historical centres where a large part of the inhabitants are immigrants

This research aims to design the paths through which it is possible to improve historical buildings located in centers which show signs of abandonment by original inhabitants and where a large part of the inhabitants are immigrants. The Italian population which remains generally lives in the “best” areas of these run down historical centers. In Italy there are 6.989 municipalities having fewer than 10.000 inhabitants (86% of all municipalities); with a population of 19.000.000, they represent 32,7% of the population of Italy. In many of these centers “a chain of degradation” is showing. Their properties thus run down, they can obtain only lower rents, the only ones affordable for many immigrants. Often the private owners expect the municipal administration to upgrade the public spaces near their properties in order to enhance their value. In many of these centers “a chain of degradation” is showing. Often the private owners expect the municipal administration to upgrade the public spaces near their properties in order to enhance their value. To regenerate and increase the value of the real estate it is possible to follow two approaches at same time: on the one hand economizing on the costs of the physical rehabilitation (social housing, self-recovery, etc.) and on the other improving territory with roads, parks, infrastructures, etc. while creating services. In this way the immigrants and their culture may be considered a revitalisation resource.

Key words: *small historical centres, immigrants, real estate, regeneration, “chain of degradation”*

1. Weaknesses and resources

In Italy, small historic centres are subjected to significant transformation processes related to their location (mountains, hills, plains) and the state of the settlement (urban sprawl, proximity to medium or large cities, position within metropolitan areas or isolated areas, etc.).

Two extremes of these transformations can be identified:

- the “philological” recovery, which restores the town to its “original” aspect - also in the presence of depopulation and abandonment of assets - that is characterized by holiday houses, which are inhabited only on weekends or during holidays, often by residents from nearby cities (as is the case, for example, of many of the small villages of Umbria and Tuscany);
- the abandonment of the historic centre: degradation takes place due to the lack of interest among owners and government in investing in their regeneration. This results in serious decay of the physical structures, precluding the habitability or, alternatively, providing housing only for the poorest citizens), mainly immigrants.

Within these two categories there is a wide number of different cases.

Currently, there are many small historic towns inhabited by immigrants. Upon these historic centres converge:

- the interests of the low-income population lacking housing support by the government and seeking a solution;

- the interests of the building owners who, rather than investing in their assets, consider renting more profitable, as they are not obliged to engage in rehabilitation transactions that have an uncertain market outcome.

However, it should be kept in mind that in some towns, some of the historic buildings, owned or purchased *ad hoc* by the government, have been destined, after adequate restoration, for social housing.

2. Cases

One particularly significant case is that of the historic centres of the Castelli Romani, near Rome.

These towns have become one of the favourite destinations for Roman families who are not able to afford escalating rents of the capital. The phenomenon of the abandonment of city centres began in the late nineteen-eighties. Households having a decent level of income preferred to move to new housing outside the city centre, above all to ensure more comfort, better accommodations and better accessibility (traffic and parking). Consequently, rental prices in the city centre dropped sharply, favouring renting to immigrants. The attraction of this area of the Province of Rome is also tied to the presence of networks of solidarity, public transport and employment opportunities.

Generally, the local population lives in the “best” areas where the offices of the municipality, the municipal library etc. often are located. The presence of government offices is crucial because it represents a urban deterrent for the resident population, making the area even more attractive to people residing outside of the centres.

In this articulation of utilization, it must be considered that some of the towns that have been entirely abandoned by private owners have begun to deteriorate severely due to the lack of even minimal and ordinary maintenance, (small collapsing cornices, etc.) Often, private owners expecting an increase in property values in order to sell or recover expenses rely on the activity of the public administrations to enhance their property’s worth.

Public administrations are trying to combine restoration policies with social policies aimed at helping immigrants: general services, services that help new arrived to find housing, education, training programs, and work opportunities. Generally, however, these are never sufficient to create harmonious living conditions: often the local population does not accept the alien cultures, and on the part of the immigrants, there is lack of what is called “respect for the rules”. In this intermingled situation, conflicts rise, attempts at integration and trade subsist in a cornucopia of relationships that can create significant intercultural gaps.

In addition to rendering liveable some parts of the historic centres, and thereby avoiding their abandonment, immigrants represent additional elements of vitality for the territory:

- They support the labour supply demanded by agricultural enterprises (particularly, fruit and vegetables, wine and flowers), local construction companies (this

is generally true in Lazio) and manufacturing firms (characteristic of areas in the central and northern regions of Italy);

- They permit the elderly to continue living in “their” centres, by providing them with a multitude of caregivers;
- They provide for the continuing upkeep of a certain proportion of the local population, offering services to small businesses whose management has long since been abandoned by locals.
- They reinstate, alongside the elderly, some of the ancient professions in which young people are no longer interested.

It should be noted that the situation of social and economic subordination in which these ethnicities find themselves is slowly changing, even in small historic centres: some immigrants, favoured by the low prices, have been able to buy their homes, that are often severely deteriorated.

While in recent years home buying by immigrants has experienced a continuous increase, in 2009 there was a negative trend (a decrease of 24.3% compared to 2008). If on one hand, the purchase of housing by immigrants is a positive factor for their stabilization, on the other, it is creating major problems in respect to the maintenance of the assets. In fact, often work is carried out without any respect for historical values and public areas have been tampered with.

3. Services for reviving and “preserving” historic centres

Municipalities undergoing depopulation are experimenting with various methods for preventing the abandonment of their historic centres. One of the “tasks” that some of the small historic centres have adopted is that of receiving refugees. The town of Riace, which since 2001 is part of the Programma Nazionale Asilo (national asylum program), and the territories of Locride (Calabria) can all boast an interesting experiment on the issue: that of accepting immigrants and refugees and establishing a model. In light of these positive results, the region of Calabria has promulgated Legislation n.18/2009, “Accoglienza dei richiedenti Asilo, dei rifugiati e sviluppo sociale, economico e culturale delle Comunità locali” (reception of asylum seekers, refugees and social, economic and cultural development of the local community). A tri-annual regional plan is to be implemented to support actions in favour of communities affected by a decrease in population that wish to upgrade and restore related socio-economic and cultural areas linked to the reception of asylum seekers, refugees, as well as subsidiary protection and humanitarian aid groups.

The community of Montazzoli is also on the road to being repopulated. This tiny ancient town in Abruzzo has just over 1,000 inhabitants. The town’s middle school is likely to disappear if there are not enough pupils in the next school year for the first class. The city council has issued a call “Pro prima media” (pro first middle school) regarding a rent-free provision for 3 years, beginning with the school year of 2010-2011, and a total municipal housing tax exemption for all those

non-resident households who enroll their children in the first grade of the Montazzoli middle school (starting in 2010-2011). Those who may participate in the decree are all non-resident households holding Italian citizenship or those who come from an EU country, as well as foreigners who hold a residence card or have legal residence permits.

4. Methods to regeneration

Municipalities undergoing depopulation are experimenting with various methods to regeneration such as:

- combining restoration policies with social policies aimed at helping immigrants;
- promoting policies aimed to enhance territorial values;
- receiving refugees (interesting experiment in Locride-Calabria);
- creating innovative incentives aimed at keeping open schools (like to do offer a flat rent-free to the families having some children of school age and which are willing to live in these historical centres);
- restricting the construction of the new buildings to move the interest of investors to the regeneration ones;
- making plans where immigrants could be a kind of re-population and could promote new economic activities.

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