

# The Role of The Ecomuseo Dei Terrazzamenti E Della Vite, (Cortemilia, Italy) in Community Development

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## Abstract

One important reaction to globalization in the twenty-first century has been the democratization of culture and heritage. Local communities have increasingly attempted to recognise and conserve their heritage resources and use them to create sustainable economic development through ecotourism and cultural tourism. Ecomuseum philosophy and practical processes, although they originated in France, have been used in many countries to enable local residents to define, validate and celebrate local distinctiveness and local identity. This article introduces and critiques these philosophies and processes and then describes how one community in the north of Italy (Cortemilia) used them to harness the natural and cultural resources of its locality to enable local people to re-identify their own 'sense of place' and rekindle pride in their community. The conclusion compares the processes and outcomes in Cortemilia with two other ecomuseums created to aid community development.

**Key words:** Ecomuseums, community development, Italy, Cortemilia

## Introduction

The small town of Cortemilia had once benefited from a strategic geographical location between the coast and the hinterland. It was renowned for its high quality agricultural produce, but had suffered, like many other rural areas in Europe, from economic decline, emigration and the consequent abandonment of farmland. In addition, from 1889 to 1996 the valley had been heavily polluted by a chemical factory located 30 kilometres from Cortemilia and in 1994 a terrible flood emphasized the fragility of a cultural landscape that had lost its purpose. The terraced hillsides lay partly ruined at the bottom of the valley, a visual metaphor for environmental and social erosion. In 1996 the factory closed, but only after several years of lobbying by the local inhabitants. The townspeople of Cortemilia now had an opportunity to assess their options and face the challenge of creating a new future. It was at this point that an ecomuseum approach was suggested, utilizing the town's local distinctiveness with its links to history, landscape and environment. This article explores how ecomuseum principles were applied in practice, using local heritage to provide sustainable solutions for this small rural community.

## Ecomuseum philosophy and practices

The ways in which the ecomuseum concept originated, developed and was adopted by communities as a means of capturing a sense of identity, conserving natural and cultural sites and promoting economic growth has been described by several authors, including Poulot (1994) and Davis (1999).

A particularly significant episode in this narrative was the joint UNESCO and International Council of Museums (ICOM) round table meeting in May 1972, held in Santiago, Chile. Here new goals for museums and the concept of *the integrated museum* were promoted; this new model recognized the local community as the most important stakeholder in local museums, and demanded that they should have significant sociological goals. The museum was perceived as a tool for social change, a task that required a move away from traditional object-centred curatorship to new practices that put people and communities first. A new kind of

museum was required to deliver these goals, and in France, George Henri Rivière and his colleague, the then General Secretary of ICOM, Hugues de Varine, developed the first material expressions of the community/integrated museum model that had been promoted in Santiago. This demanded a radical change in thinking, the museum as a building being replaced by the notion of the museum as a place, a distinct geographical area with its own innate characteristics expressed through its geology and landscape, nature, material culture, its people and their intangible heritage. It was Varine who coined the word 'écomusée' (in 1971, for the use of the then French Minister for the Environment, Robert Poujade) for this new vision of 'museum as place' with a democratic community-centred approach.

The first tentative steps began in France in the late 1960s, the 'Maison des techniques et traditions ouessantines' and its associated 'circuit museographique', which opened in July 1968, being regarded as the world's first ecomuseum. Close links were made with conservation and interpretation within the French Regional Nature Parks, an holistic approach to the interpretation of ecology, nature, landscape and rural life. In contrast, the urban setting of Le Creusot, near Lyon, was the site for an experimental industrial ecomuseum opened to the public in 1974, its purpose being the regeneration of the area by developing a 'fragmented' museum (a number of scattered but linked heritage sites) in a democratic, inclusive way. The idea of a 'split site' museum has gradually become integral to the development of ecomuseums worldwide.

By the 1980s new definitions of 'heritage' were being promoted by Common Ground in the UK (Clifford and King, 1993). These more inclusive views of heritage – encapsulating intangible heritages and small scale features that contribute to local distinctiveness - have gradually become more embedded in more democratic cultural policies that challenge elitism and 'high-culture' and seek empowerment for communities (Smith, 2006). The philosophy and practice of ecomuseums and new museology as proposed at Santiago embraced these ideas of local distinctiveness and the need to celebrate heritage on a small scale, and have been a significant driving force in the gradual growth of ecomuseum practices worldwide. Although the term 'new museology,' has gradually been reinterpreted by the museums profession to embrace the broad sweep of changes in approaches and practices adopted by museums from the 1970s, or to the application of critical and cultural theories to museums (Davis, 1999; Davis 2008) at the heart of ecomuseum philosophy lies its original meaning, one focused on community action, empowerment and democracy.

Efforts made by theorists to define the meaning of the term 'ecomuseum' demonstrate the gradual shift in operational strategies and functions of these heritage-related projects. Rivière's own "Evolutive definition" (1985) allowed scope for a variety of interpretations, which were re-worked by Mayrand (1983, quoted in Rivard, 1988), Stephenson (1982) and Rivard (1988), all emphasizing the significance of 'territory', a claimed geographical area within which exist a range of heritage sites, perhaps one of the easiest way of conceptualising the ecomuseum. However, more recently the emphasis has moved from territory to development, with the 'Long Network' of ecomuseums developed in Europe provided a concise definition, namely that: 'An ecomuseum is a dynamic way in which communities preserve, interpret, and manage their heritage for sustainable development. An ecomuseum is based on a community agreement'. (*Declaration of Intent of the Long Net Workshop*, Trento (Italy), May 2004). Davis (2007: 119) further simplified the definition, stating that an ecomuseum is 'a community-lead heritage or museum project that supports sustainable development'. Lists of ecomuseum attributes have been provided by Corsane and Holleman (1993) and Davis (1999) and have been further developed and utilised to assess how far ecomuseums reach the tenets of the philosophy (Corsane *et al.* 2007a).

The flexible philosophy of the ecomuseum has meant that it has become increasingly popular as a means of heritage conservation and interpretation; and as a tool for regeneration of rural areas by promoting cultural tourism. It has not been universally welcomed (see, for example, Howard 2007; Sauty 2001), and some French authors (e.g. Chaumier 2003, Debary 2003) have criticized ecomuseums in France for becoming too 'mainstream', for losing their radical edge. Despite the criticisms (and misunderstandings caused by the 'eco' prefix), the numbers of ecomuseums continues to increase; in 1998 Davis (1999) indicated that there were some 166 ecomuseums in 25 countries. The number is now far greater, for example in 1998

Italy could boast 15 ecomuseums; in 2009 there are 98 ([www.ecomusei.net](http://www.ecomusei.net)); the same web site lists 259 ecomuseums in Europe alone. Japan had a few emerging ideas in 1998, it now has nine sites using the term and many other ecomuseological initiatives (Kazuoki Ohara, pers.comm, August 2008). In many cases the initial drive for ecomuseum establishment has been a perceived threat to local heritage; in other situations, such as that described below, the use of inclusive ecomuseological processes capitalising on heritage resources was identified as a means to regenerate a region and its community.

### **The Ecomuseo dei Terrazzamenti e della Vite, Cortemilia - South Piedmont**

The history of the environmental, social and economic decline of Cortemilia has been described briefly above. In 1995 one of the authors (DM) began to initiate ecomuseum processes in the town because of the opportunity offered by the passing of a Regional Law in the region of Piemonte, Italy, that promoted the creation of a regional ecomuseums network. The other author (PD) visited Cortemilia in the early years of the project and began to collaborate with her to explore the processes used, the outcomes of the project and to reflect on the impact that ecomuseum development had on the local community. In the following description DM therefore appears as both a major 'actor' - an active voice involved in the creation of the ecomuseum - and (with PD) as an analyst of the process and experience of ecomuseum creation.

Her involvement in the development of the ecomuseum happened purely by chance. She was invited to give a talk in the town of Bra, located close to Cortemilia, recounting her previous personal experience in England, where she had researched the importance of the rural landscape in the shaping of local development. She described the survey she had been involved in and its focus on cultural and historical values. To make the experience more down to earth and practical for the audience she concluded her speech by mentioning the regional ecomuseum law in Piemonte - that had been very recently passed - and its potential to impact on landscape, heritage, local distinctiveness and quality of life. Among the audience there were several people who suggested to her that Cortemilia, with its problematical environmental past and current economic situation, might benefit from an ecomuseum approach. These individuals acted as mediators between her and representatives of the local government, who were sceptical about the process. Only after five meetings - that time being necessary to explain what an ecomuseum was and why it could help Cortemilia in rebuilding its local self confidence and widening appreciation of the local heritage - did the local officials agree to pay consultancy fees to develop a project outline to be submitted to the Piemonte Regional Government for approval and funding.

The project was submitted only after extensive consultation and debate with local and regional associations, a process that proved to be a key factor. As a result of the many meetings DM had with local organizations and key people to make them aware of the project and its aims, the final project brief included more than 20 supportive letters. These were not only from local interest groups, individuals and associations, but also from other interested bodies including UNESCO World Heritage and the Head of the Department of the Council of Europe involved in the definition of the European Landscape Convention. The latter was especially relevant because the remarkable terraced landscape (more precisely: terraces and vineyards) of Cortemilia was chosen as the ecomuseum's key theme. The discussions had revealed contemporary recognition (seemingly for the first time strongly expressed) of the importance and meanings that the terraced landscape has always had for the valley and its inhabitants. Thus the political will was generated to support the project, and to move forward with the restoration of the terraced hillsides that had been ravaged by floodwaters.

The Ecomuseum project was seen as a very efficient way to move forward from a static situation to a new perspective where the well being of the area and its inhabitants was at the core of the project. The ecomuseum was chosen as a tool towards a more sustainable local development (Gian Carlo Veglio, former Major of Cortemilia)

The Cortemilia proposal was selected for aid by the regional government in 1996, but the first tranche of funding came only at the end of 1999 due to bureaucratic reasons. In order to avoid

the loss of local momentum the local government representatives and DM decided to overcome the situation by promoting a series of low cost communication initiatives including newspaper articles, seminars for the local community on a variety of themes (from sustainable tourism to vineyard management) and conferences. Using these approaches the ecomuseum idea was constantly promoted as a long term strategy needed to provide a positive sense of belonging to the town and to encourage the community to recognize its unique history, its cultural, natural and intangible heritage, and its distinctive cultural landscape. These features were identified as the key resources to aid local sustainable development, including economic benefits for the local community. At this stage discussions began regarding the choice of specific projects and activities that would galvanise ecomuseum development.

As mentioned earlier the ecomuseum concept has been debated by activists and theorists for some 40 years without clear consensus; it was perhaps inevitable then that such ideas were not going to be explained easily to local people. In addition the inhabitants had faced extremely difficult times and were unlikely to be receptive towards any new initiative; there was no previous experience of working on cultural projects; little experience of cooperating with other organizations, even at the local level, and certainly not regionally, nationally or internationally. The town had neither a museum nor a public library and little self-awareness and no collective awareness about local heritage. It was against this backdrop of low self-esteem, a low point in the town's history, that ecomuseum ideas had to be initiated; although its potential was unknown there was an immediate benefit of financial support. Murtas notes:

When the money came to the Commune bank account it was like a bolt out of the blue: the local community (Cortemilia has some 2,200 inhabitants) now had the responsibility to make things happen and yet they had no capacity – in terms of time and experienced personnel - to do so. It took them quite a while before they decided to ask me (someone not from Cortemilia) if I could help. At that time I was already working on local development projects which had culture at their core, in training courses and so on and I was based in Torino. To say yes was not so easy: I would have to travel every week for two hours, stay in Cortemilia for two/three days and then two hours driving back to Torino. Was this too much to ask for what I was being offered financially? On the other hand it was a very challenging project and the terraced theme plus the community involvement made me accept it. I will never forget my first day of work. I arrived at the Town Hall on an autumn morning. There I had a short talk with the Mayor who said that I had to report things to him and no-one else. I was shown my desk that was in the room of the engineering department and that was all. The building surveyor had to share his room with me and, more than that, his telephone. Not easy for him, not for me, but it worked well for one year. I had to go around to the other offices to introduce myself to the people working there and I started thinking from where to start. It was very clear to me that I had to find a very solid strategy in order to make the ecomuseum project effective and down-to-earth. I knew that I had the eyes of many on my moves and that the first step would be crucial. In a sense I was lucky in not being driven by politics, but I was also aware that this could play against me and my choices.

From the beginning it was very clear that conservation, maintenance and rebuilding of the terraced landscape would never happen without a revolution in local perception about their place. For that reason the project had at its core the *contemporary* interpretation of the values linked to the terraced landscape, with the well being of the local community being the most important goal. The adoption of a classical or traditional museum scheme was not considered appropriate when dealing with a landscape with such a very strong character. The need for a more dynamic and revolutionary scheme was of strategic importance, and the project team (which was very small at the beginning: DM and a very informal 'scientific committee' made of 2 European professionals and 1 local) adopted an ecomuseological approach from the outset, recognizing that the distinctive nature of the territory, the need for local empowerment and to create a sustainable future were paramount, and that these features are central to ecomuseum philosophy and practice. Views about the past simply for the sake of nostalgia were therefore

discouraged during the project, as the goal was to consider strategies that would look to the future, not dwell on the past, much of which had - in living memory been a difficult and disheartening period. European LEADER funding, then available, was directed towards contemporary rural life and Murtas was quick to capitalise on this. She records her feelings at the time:

It was of great help to be able to join a European LEADER project on terraced landscapes. We were able to take this opportunity thanks to an English friend who passed on to me the project proposal. I had to convince the local politicians, and it was not easy, but in the end they accepted. They had never taken part in any European project and felt somewhat compromised because of their lack of experience; some simply thought it was a waste of time. They soon changed their minds: it was the best European project I had ever been involved in. The working group was excellent and we were able to involve politicians as well as local people. They could see how things can be done and how ideas can be shared. Meetings were held in France and Spain with the purpose to get to know more about each other (Greece was also a participant country) and to shape the project according to our common goals. We held several thematic meetings around the four countries to fulfill the project aims. We are still in contact, although ten years have passed by. These kinds of opportunities are the best training projects: they open minds and create a superb positive energy. We created a local and European group who worked very well together and act as a collective testimonial for the terraced landscapes and their communities. In Cortemilia a positive view of the ecomuseum project began to spread by word of mouth into the local community, despite scepticism from some quarters. Step by step the Ecomuseum project was defined from solid beginnings. Local people became aware that the terraced landscape, although linked to hard times and poverty could become a symbolic presence and theme. The terraces give a sense of continuity in time and space; they link people and place; they are inclusive and not exclusive; they are a good example of a sustainable approach towards local and available resources; they were built by the community and not by an architect or an engineer; they have no signature; they are in harmony with nature, following its laws and not forcing them. In many ways the terraces are like a territorial skeleton, supporting human activities and dreams.

From its inception the ecomuseum project involved as many people as possible in the local community, from children to elderly people, and interested individuals as well as associations. This was an intensive and demanding process, requiring many hours of meetings, discussions and persuasion, trying to inculcate belief in the project and deciding upon activities that could be successfully achieved. Much of this initial work focused on working with local people to help them discover that there were valuable local resources in their everyday lives that belonged to everyone. Symptomatic of the starting situation were responses by locals to questions about what was special and distinctive about the area: most of the inhabitants were very vague, often searching for an answer; the usual response was to cite the main church and the town's medieval tower. Or silence. Little evidence was provided of the thousands of tangible and intangible elements that made, and make, the Cortemilia area distinctive and special in everyday life. A rich heritage was seemingly invisible to local eyes; hardship, depression and lack of trust in authority had meant that even the predominant feature in the local cultural landscape, the terraced hillsides, seemed to have been erased from memory. Local views varied:

I was very intrigued by the idea of the project and I thought that there would be plenty to do, since very little had been done to look after and enhance the local heritage of the area (Piero Dotta, local architect).

I had no interest in it at the beginning because I believed that this area didn't need this kind of superficial project. The real need was to offer new jobs and to make the place well connected by the construction of new roads. This would be of real



help, a good cause to put money into (Carlo Berner, local entrepreneur and local politician)

It was essential to change minds and open up a serious discourse with local people. A series of initiatives were made to enable the rediscovery of what could be called - and finally seen as - 'local heritage'. Murtas notes that:

'During the first three years the main work was effectively carried out by me, it takes time to find the right people to work with in this very unusual field. People have to be open-minded, willing to discover new and experimental paths in the field of local development and culture, to be cheerful and at ease with people. When I tried to create a task force I strongly underlined the point that it was important that it included not just locals, but also outsiders. There was the need to have new ideas, energy and sensibility towards the locally available assets. It was another battle, but it was evident from the beginning that some professional expertise was not locally available, including designers, illustrators, film makers, and a team to create exhibitions. These skills had to be imported, and in the end they were all appreciated. The local group - the core group, the volunteers who were already involved - took part according to needs and when funding was available. Key local participants included an individual dealing with educational project, another dedicated to agricultural activities and, two years ago, we recruited a person for tourism and foreign visits (the area is now seeing an increase in tourist numbers). We are all consultants now and our future is mainly in the hands of the annual Regional funding. Over the years we have improved income activities, but the percentage of the total expenditure is still very low. Of course, this is an economic calculation - if we were to add in the time and efforts of our volunteers it would be a very different figure. For this reason we are trying to make a social report and to give evidence of the broader positive effects. This could help us, and all the Regional ecomuseums, to demonstrate our achievements. It is still the case that we have opponents who say that it is better to put the money into building new roads and industries'.

The ecomuseum project is now nine years old and has achieved good results in terms of acknowledgment of local potential and people empowerment. Its strength has been based on a practical approach rather than attempting to promote ecomuseological theory; these steps are described below.

Despite its monumental scale, the terraced landscape, the theme chosen as the main signifier of the Ecomuseum, was not really appreciated before work began. As a result, and having to start from this low level of understanding, it was decided to work at three different levels in the community, always repeating to participants that the terraced landscape was a means to throw light on local culture and local patterns of life. Although these may be seen as separate projects, all of them were related and eventually became intertwined.

### **First level**

The first level was to create a path towards developing common values and meanings, building understanding about heritage resources. DM was aware that the project would not be sustainable in the long term unless there was a strong sense of involvement. Consequently participative projects and interpretative thematic exhibits were chosen as the best means of achieving this. An appeal was made for material culture and memories about the town from local inhabitants willing to contribute their objects, reminiscences and ideas. The focus here was on individuals rather than the town's local associations which it was felt would enable everyone who wished to take part - an inclusive process - and to try to capture what made Cortemilia different from other localities, and identify stories that could be shared by everyone. From the artefacts and narratives contributed by local people the ecomuseum staff created exhibits that were shown in a marquee in the main village square during the summer. Every year a new theme was launched; these included exhibitions on small scale local vernacular architecture, local

vegetable crops, local recipes and individual personal stories linked to everyday objects, where objects had come to represent 'life milestones'. Local people warmed to the task:

It was the first time I was asked to relate my experience, the experience of a life spent working in agriculture. I felt important and I believe that it is very important to collect this not written knowledge. If the old people die nobody will know about this area and its traditional uses. (Luigi Porro, farmer and the main 'character' in the exhibition about chestnuts, now aged 88).

DM feels that these exhibitions 'contributed to the shaping of a common heritage. There was nothing similar done before, so we could move freely according to what was more useful. Parts of some exhibits were designed to become permanent features in our site. All of them were able to travel and be our testimonials'.

Each exhibition enabled the ecomuseum team to gain a better understanding of local beliefs and knowledge, breaking stereotypical perceptions of history and that of the town itself. Perhaps more importantly these small exhibitions also resulted in the breaking of boundaries between individuals, families, different age groups and between the local associations. Every contributor had the chance to see their own object or story adjacent to those of others, to make comparisons but also to recognize a common story. Some exhibitions were organized with other external agencies - for example with other 'terrace' communities in other parts of the world - in order to make comparisons with the experiences of others but also to demonstrate shared values, problems and ways of life. This led to the building of new alliances and strong friendships far beyond the physical territory of Cortemilia: long distance communities of interest were established based on common values, providing fresh energy and new ideas.

These kinds of exhibitions are really special, nothing like that was done before. They are very smart and full of life and they really add something new and good for our minds and eyes. They offer a new way to look at our common heritage because a lot of people took place in making the content, telling what they know or giving what they had: a tool, an object. I applaud the initiatives, well done. (Piero Carena, local entrepreneur, now retired).

Another successful initiative at this 'first level' utilized the creativity and imagination of children. Every year all the students in the primary schools of the valley were asked to write short imaginative fairy tales which deal with themes coming from the terraced landscape or from local knowledge. In this way all children were able to see themselves as part of the same community and as contributing to the shaping of a new interpretative approach toward local heritage. In the fourth year of these fairy tales it was decided to make the competition a national one, and to have a special award for professional writers of children's literature. A National Award for Children Literature took place, and has continued until the present day, when it is now in its 8th edition. As a result an important bridge has been made between the local children from the community and professional authors, and brought Cortemilia much good publicity. The final 'first level' initiative was to run summer work camps with University students from all over Europe, and to welcome external groups who are also interested in local development based on community participation. These activities have also reinvigorated a sense of community belonging and built a capacity amongst local people in terms of organization and interpretation. Above all, local people are much more aware of the features that make the character of Cortemilia so special and so distinctive.

I like to work on local traditions and I like to transfer real stories into new theatre plays; there is a new meaning in doing so and our company can add its bit to the making of the overall project. (Vanni Ciocca, pharmacist and amateur actor).

## **Second level**

Second level initiatives focused on giving new life to old buildings. Local scepticism and pessimism had to be overcome by delivering projects that were highly visible and had immediate community benefit. Consequently efforts were made to select structures that linked directly to

the terraced landscape. They were chosen because of their position, their inner qualities, their state of abandonment and their potential as sites that could be used to develop more narratives and ideas. No buildings were restored simply for the sake of much-needed conservation. Restoration was always linked to collective re-use, therefore facilitating a common approach and encouraging local people to become stakeholders in these projects, so giving them ownership and responsibility. One obvious need was that there were no suitable structures to host either the ecomuseum office, or the ecomuseum's growing number and range of activities. In addition the ecomuseum project had to act as a good example in the conservation, renewal and re-use of important but abandoned built structures in the terraced landscape. Building restoration offered the opportunity to create a centre for ecomuseum activity.

The ecomuseum has been involved in conserving three main structures, each located in different parts of the Cortemilia area. They all play a key role in generating a new sense of belonging. However, there were issues here; DM notes: 'The biggest problem was to deal with bureaucracy. It was important to involve local small businesses in restoration work, but the local administration was not ready to take this opportunity and fell into a classic trap of 'papers and signatures'. One of many paradoxes was that to restore a small hut for drying chestnut (made hundreds of years ago as a spontaneous, simple building) I was requested to submit a project signed off by an architect rather than simply employing local craftsmen who had the skills to work in stone.'

Despite such problems the projects continued, with the first to be chosen an historical building in the old village centre. Surprisingly this building had been condemned, despite the fact that it occupied an important site in the centre of the town; perhaps in a way it emphasized the malaise among local people about their future. Its subsequent restoration and re-use as an interpretation centre, library, a venue for temporary exhibitions, video projection and meetings has not only demonstrated a new use of an old building, but put the heart back into the town's historic centre. The restoration of this traditional stone building, which now also acts as the headquarters for the ecomuseum, resulted in the award of significant prizes. Interestingly, in recent years the other vernacular architectures located in the same square have been restored, while the square itself – once an ugly tarmac car park – is now a charming pedestrian area, paved with stone and used for exhibits, theatre and film projection.

My first shop and laboratory was on a corner of the square. It was a very modest and small place, but my hazelnut cakes are and were so appreciated that a lot of clients coming from a lot of places came there. They all complain about the square and the feeling of abandonment that they had. Now the building with the ecomuseum offices offers a good restoration example and the square has become pedestrianised, everybody is really happy. Now that the square is so beautiful my family and I have decided to leave the old shop and to buy a bigger building on the square. We decide that it is worth investing in the old village.'  
(Giuseppe Canobbio, *patissier* and owner of a pastry shop looking onto the square)

The second building is a farm with adjacent vineyards and orchard. Sitting on a superb terraced hilly promontory with a Romanic church at its feet, the farm and its terraced fields had been abandoned for more than 30 years. Everyone in Cortemilia thought it was impossible to buy it because of the complications of the site's multiple ownership. However, the persistence of the ecomuseum team led to its purchase, and successful efforts were made to secure funding for its restoration. In one year the farm was opened for the use of the local community, and now hosts school visits, specialist groups and general training courses, utilising its own kitchen and sleeping accommodation. The vineyard has also been restored and the ecomuseum has its own niche production of quality wine. In the restored terraced fields local varieties of vegetables and fruits are grown, so becoming an important resource for the conservation of these rare varieties. The third building is a small traditional building used to dry chestnuts, mentioned above. It was semi-derelict and located in the middle of a hamlet belonging to the Cortemilia area, but its special rounded shape made it a unique building in the local landscape. The restoration, eventually made by a local expert, followed the traditional dry stone technique, so ensuring the maintenance of the aesthetics of the building. Its inauguration became a very significant local



event; the fact that almost everyone in the village came to the celebration provided a clear message of a renewed sense of belonging.

During the past years we lost the time and the will to spend some time together. The chestnut hut project gave us the possibility to have a nice time all together. Everybody came, it was a real milestone event for this small hamlet. Who would think that such an idea could bring people together? (Mario Gallo, bus and taxi driver, inhabitant of the hamlet).

One year later the ecomuseum worked with elderly people in the village to put the drying chestnut hut to work again, utilizing their local knowledge of the techniques and the procedures that needed to be followed. Again, there was great local support through these working phases, which eventually resulted in the packaging of the dried chestnuts which were then sold to a niche market. All three practical building projects enabled people to rekindle local connections, make new friends and build a real sense of pride and self confidence.

### Third level

The third level of development utilized the power of intangible local heritage, demonstrating how community building can be reached by initiatives that have at their core local knowledge, whether this be craft skills, local traditions or an interest in local festivals, dance, music or song. Ecomuseum initiatives tried not simply to rekindle these traditions but to give them a contemporary feel, attempting to throw new light on traditional events such as Carnival, Midsummer night, and seasonal local markets. The number and qualities of these initiatives have grown significantly with the aid of ecomuseum processes, and have encouraged local people to work together using their local intangible heritage. The benefits have been important, not only in terms of strengthening the local economy but also in enabling people to gain the social and cultural capital that leads to a community sense of belonging.

I remember the time when bonfires were lit near the farms to celebrate Midsummer night. It is a real pleasure to see them again and more than that to come to a place for the pleasure of meeting other people, and not for tourism performance ... (Paolo Marenda, Cortemilia inhabitant)

The end result of this range of ecomuseum-inspired initiatives is that there is now a growing interest in the area and its heritage. Schools and adult groups are visiting Cortemilia to learn more about its local heritage, which has the benefit of supporting the local economy but also places new demands on the community. To develop the capacity to meet these needs – to provide specialist experiences or training - a flexible working group was formed by local people who had expertise in several different skills from dry stone walling, to bread making and orchard pruning. The positive effect is that these people have identified themselves as a group; by forming these new connections they have realized there is a need to work together more effectively and to promote their skills and abilities to visitors. Similarly, thanks to another ecomuseum project, 'the basket of the terraced landscape products', local producers are now cooperating with each other for the first time, together promoting their knowledge and the high quality of their produce using the 'terraced landscape' as a marketing asset. The same idea was used by the local wine producers through a cooperative 'wine of the terraces' project. In effect the terraced landscape has become a marketable 'brand'.

It is difficult to be taken seriously if you are a small producer and if you are not following 'the hazelnut mainstream'. I am glad that somebody is now giving importance to small local producers and I like to be part of a group made by people like myself and willing to find new paths for promotion and local involvement (Claudia Pomi, cheese maker)

### Ecomuseum impact

After a dark past of pollution and decline, the Ecomuseum's activities have played a strategic

role in the shaping of future sustainable local development for Cortemilia. Despite sometimes seemingly insurmountable problems, new visions and projects have changed local attitudes towards their place. Cortemilia has witnessed the development of new forms of social relationships among people who had previously been disinterested in their place and in their community. The projects described above have seen the creation of new social networks, and a growing sense of community. Interestingly, people have moved from previously having had little contact with each other and having had little sense that they shared some common interests or concerns, to having not only a deeper understanding of their heritage, but also a recognition that such heritage has contemporary cultural and economic value. Ecomuseum processes have forged new social relationships that have impacted in many different ways on the future prospects of this geographical locality. Symptomatic of this is the re-branding of Cortemilia based upon the now restored and actively used terraced landscapes; local people have re-created the town and its environs not simply through delivering successful heritage projects, but by capitalizing on a renewed sense of purpose and a revitalized sense of place.

Murtas remains confident about the future:

What will make the Cortemilia ecomuseum successful and lively in the future will be to remain faithful to its experimental and provocative approach towards local heritage and, in doing so, to be strongly in contact with its community. Its role should be to offer different, critical views and perceptions of local heritage, helping to forge everyday, important, sustainable, collective and individual choices, acting to keep alive environmental and cultural richness. I see it as an incubator, a way of encouraging good practice in cultural and environmental management. Inevitably some projects will die, but others will be carried on by individuals or groups. One of the greater risks, especially in the forthcoming phase of the project, is that we become a 'normal' or 'traditional' museum and fail to have continuous dialogue and interaction with the local community. It is true that to retreat from serious involvement with the local community is quite tempting: it is so energy and time demanding that you get exhausted. Conflicts arise frequently. There are always conflicts in a sane and lively community. However, the ecomuseum working group should listen to local people, and learn how best to resolve problems. I have experienced that it is more important - and of crucial importance to the ecomuseum and community wellbeing - to open doors to admit unpredictable (often positive) circumstances instead of continuing to persevere in putting into practice what ecomuseum theory might say. You have to be in a 'stand by' position all the time and react promptly when something of interest, some opportunity comes along. In that respect the Piemonte Regional Law about ecomuseums is excellent because it is flexible and written for interdisciplinary projects. Let's hope they don't go only for rigid standards and formats: that will be the end of the experimental and lively side of this project.

## Discussion

Ecomuseum approaches have now been adopted in many parts of the world with differing levels of success, but as a tool within spatial planning and community development, especially at the small or local scale, they appear to be a fruitful way forward. Their philosophies and practices have changed significantly during the last thirty years, with increasing emphasis on the social role that heritage-community projects can play. These include the development of social and cultural capital of local residents (Corsane et al 2007), which in turn can lead to increased capacity to work together to deliver projects that can aid sustainable development. The description above indicates that Cortemilia has broadly benefited from ecomuseum processes, but we need to identify how this has been achieved and whether it compares favourably to other ecomuseum projects.

Our experience suggests that the criteria for successful ecomuseum projects are the following:

- Strong but sensitive leadership

- A well-defined need or challenge
- An inclusive process
- An holistic approach to place
- Community-based with effective networking
- A recognition of the significance of intangible heritage
- The conservation of cultural, natural and intangible heritage resources
- The ability to link the past with the present, to discuss place now, to sustain local identity and aid regeneration
- To be sustainable

The ecomuseum project in Cortemilia fulfils the majority of these criteria, although we would be the first to recognise that the emphasis that has been placed on the built heritage and material culture, that a more holistic approach has yet to be achieved. The town certainly faced strong environmental and social challenges, and although a recurring problem for all community-based heritage projects is that of empowering local people, this project demonstrates that with firm leadership and tenacity local people can become engaged, and that inclusive processes are possible. There has been a significant contribution to the conservation of heritage resources, with positive economic benefits. It would appear that a better quality of life and a sense of belonging have been created.

For Cortemilia – and indeed for any community-based heritage project – arguably the greatest problem is that of sustainability. There is a general recognition that sustainability and democracy go hand-in-hand, and this premise is frequently included within governmental policy statements towards the environment. In Sweden, for example, community decision-making is seen as being essential to achieve viable outcomes at a local level (Regeringskansliet, 1999). These ideas of locally-based democratic approaches to maintaining the environment have obvious connections to ecomuseum philosophy. Ideas of sustainability are also being promoted through new approaches to tourism, including ecotourism and cultural tourism. It is here, in the development of low-level, sustainable tourism, that the notions of conserving elements of the heritage of places and providing economic and community benefits collide. The concept of sustainability prompts the following three questions about Cortemilia – has this model of process and practice sustained local tangible and intangible heritage; has the ecomuseum aided the sustainability of the local community by providing tangible, intangible or economic benefits; and, is the Cortemilia ecomuseum itself a viable entity?

Only time will give an answer to the final question, but will inevitably be dependent on human and financial resources. Heritage itself – especially the built heritage and some forms of intangible expression - has certainly benefited. Perhaps the central question –community sustainability – is the most important and the most difficult to assess objectively. The Global Ecovillage Network (n.d.) suggests that communities are sustained by ecological connections (place, local products/foods), social connections (communal spaces and the sharing of ideas) and spiritual connections (celebrations, arts, festivals and rituals). Using these criteria, and exploring the descriptions above, it is reasonable to suggest that the Cortemilia ecomuseum is at least providing a platform to support community sustainability, although we recognise more in-depth qualitative research is required to discover the true relationship between local people and their ecomuseum.

To compare ecomuseum projects is extraordinary difficult as each one is situated within its own unique environmental, social and political contexts. However, in many countries ecomuseum ideals have been implemented to aid community development. In China, for example, ecomuseums have been utilised as a major means of promoting sustainable development in poor rural areas, usually with a stated aim to aid ethnic minority communities (Davis 2007) aided by the governmental support for cultural heritage development expressed in China's '11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan of Development 2006 - 2010' (Rong, 2006).

Hence an interesting contrast to Cortemilia is Soga ecomuseum, which is based in the small Qing Miao village of Longga, Guizhou Province. This was the first ecomuseum in China, established in October 1998, with a key feature being an Information Centre that houses the local 'Memory project'. The design of the Centre was decided upon by an architect in consultation with village people to ensure a sympathetic approach to the local landscape and respect for local building materials and techniques. Local people also carried out much of the construction work for the Centre, again promoting ownership. The memory project initially sought to document collective memories of the village inhabitants through oral recording in their own language; the Miao have no written language of their own. The project also included collections of photographs and material culture, and the documentation of village practices and rituals.

The ecomuseum project was closely tied to raising the standards of living for the villagers. Significant improvements include the renovation of houses in the old village and the provision of new housing, piped water, an electricity supply, a new school and medical facilities, and a surfaced road into the village. Festivals are celebrated in the square where local people give demonstrations of dancing and music; the Information Centre is close by, and houses a very professional exhibition about aspects of the Qing Miao and their culture. From here the visitor is free to roam through the old village, meet local people and purchase craft souvenirs.

These developments, aided by the Norwegian Government, sound extremely positive and it is difficult to condemn them when they have so manifestly changed the lives of local people, where villagers have witnessed a rise in educational and living standards and a marked decline in child mortality. However, apart from the potential dangers in exposing remote ethnic minority communities to outside influences, Soga fails to meet many of the criteria listed above. It is far from being an inclusive, community-lead project; indeed it is exactly the opposite, being a 'top-down' imposition from Central and Local Government. On a recent (10/2008) return visit to Soga one of the authors (PD) discovered that although many villagers were delighted to have an extra source of income gained through dance performance and craft sales, they had neither little or no involvement with the infrastructure that had been created, nor any say in the decision-making process. The visitor centre was badly neglected and much of the original data collected had been lost to subtropical environmental conditions; the shop was closed and the original exhibition was unchanged. New concrete buildings were beginning to change the appearance of the old village; there was no demonstrable or effective leadership. From the perspective of an outsider, the Soga Ecomuseum, the flagship development in China, did not appear sustainable. However, when interviewing local people, the response to questions about the intrusive nature of the ecomuseum development was a general air of unconcern, almost disinterest. Even the potential threat to local values due to tourism was dismissed, one elderly lady remarking that it didn't really matter if change was taking place within the community, they would still always be Qing Miao and their ethnic and cultural identity was not under threat.

The Soga experience gives a strong indication that Ecomuseum projects are not without their problems. In her detailed description of the origin and trials of creating the Ak-Chin Ecomuseum in Arizona, USA, Nancy Fuller (1992) also refers to the 'emotionally and intellectually demanding situations' that were met and had to be dealt with. Nevertheless, a new purpose-built museum was opened in June 1991, and has given the community the opportunity to reclaim its identity, a point made by the Ak-Chin Council leader, Delia Carlyle (quoted in Fuller, 1992): 'The (eco)museum makes our people the cultural interpreters for our people. Tribes are no longer the objects of information but the translators of information. When I have visitors I always drag them to the museum ... it is doing so much to bring back what we've almost lost'. The Ak-Chin were fortunate to have the long-term support of the Smithsonian Institution, who provided training and curatorial assistance, and their experience is in marked contrast to the Miao. By the end of the project it appears the Ak-Chin community had been empowered and had developed a better understanding of, and appreciation for, their own cultural identity.

The three examples described above demonstrate the individual nature and varying demands of ecomuseum projects. Some will be very successful on many fronts, some will achieve some successes, some will struggle to survive and meet their original objectives. However, of the criteria listed above, having a stated - perhaps urgent - need for a project that is formulated by local residents, and strong and determined leadership, appear to be the key

factors for sustainable, viable ecomuseums that will benefit their local communities in the long term. Ecomuseums should never be viewed as short term, quick-win projects; they demand a long-term commitment and a significant investment by the key players and fund-raisers. The people of Cortemilia have taken many years, using ecomuseum processes, to react to the needs to renew their natural, social and economic environment; in our opinion it has been a significant success story.

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