FROM REALITY-BASED MODEL TO GIS PLATFORM. MULTI-SCALAR MODELING FOR IRRIGATED LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT IN THE PAVIA PLAIN

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ABSTRACT:

This research aims to define a low-cost replicable methodology for obtaining fast multiscale information models. The experiments carried out were conducted by researchers from Dada LAB and PLAY experimental Laboratories of the University of Pavia, Department of Civil Engineering and Architecture, on the case study of the irrigated landscape of the Pavia plain. The entire work process was developed according to a low-cost purpose, starting from fast acquisition activities with UAV instruments, to the processing of photogrammetric data, urban and detailed scale modelling with open-source software, to the census, filing, and computerisation of the model. The resulting product is configured as a multiscale reality-based information system. A census card is associated with each constituent element of the model (crops, canals, valuable hydraulic artefacts). Connection to the GIS platform allows the user to query the model. The result is a digital system oriented to facilitate the management of the agricultural and irrigation landscape, and to digitally document and preserve the heritage of historical hydraulic existing artefacts. Two different GIS platforms for structuring the information system were tested. The first involved a high-budget solution using ESRI ArcGIS Pro/ArcSCENE software, and the second involved using QGIS software, an Open-Source Geographic Information System, to develop an accessible information system without license fees, to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of low-cost processes.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present contribution deals with a part of a research that, starting with the production of 3D databases obtained with low-cost tools, moves to develop a methodology to build reality-based informative models. Thanks to the use of low-cost instrumentation, such as close-range UAV (UAV - Unmanned aerial vehicle), it has been possible to obtain reliable models to develop georeferenced information systems - GIS - for heritage management. The research presented was developed in the Dada LAB and PLAY research laboratories of the University of Pavia, as self-funded research conducted by the authors of the submitted paper. The goal is to be able to define a replicable process for the documentation, mapping, and digital management of multiscale water landscape heritage.

The utopia of the digital duplicate, not only of a single building but of an entire territory, is increasingly being developed through interactive 3D open-access maps for users to disseminate knowledge of the territory and through entry-level tools that allow the observation of morphologies, spaces, and transformations. These actions developed in online platforms are focused on urbanized territory and do not evaluate rural portions, due to interests related to building density that does not consider aspects of strategic cultural and documentary importance. Through open-access digital platforms, citizens and municipalities can measure urbanized portions using Maps or Earth’s tools (Google applications). Instead, using the same system, it is not possible to know the same value for a rural element, whose surroundings cannot currently be viewed in the three dimensions. However, much less densely inhabited areas (e.g., agricultural areas) are of central economic importance to cities, as well as preserving and handing down, through the components that qualify them, the cultural identity of the populations that inhabit them.

This is the case of the Pavia plain, a historical heritage for the extensive development of the canal system, which lends itself to an emblematic landscape of transformations and modifications of the territory. These changes have defined the identity character of rural settlements, villages, and towns, marking the development of the territory. The heritage of hydraulic infrastructures and technological elements suitable for the functioning of the water network, connected to irrigation and navigation functions, needs to be located, documented, and stored to ensure its most appropriate use.

The dissemination opportunities that three-dimensional mapping would give them could rekindle interest in the population by activating policies to maintain and safeguard this complex system, a cultural, historical, and economic heritage. The need to structure an adequate model to represent the hydraulics works and engineering elements that characterize this territory become the natural procedural step to ensure an investigation of the territory's identity as comprehensively as possible.

2. MULTISCALAR ANALYSIS PROCESSES

The "multiscalar" survey, from the architectural artefact to the extension of the landscape, represents a fundamental tool of analysis, investigation, and synthesis for the understanding and systematisation of the complexity of elements and signs, of historical and cultural character, that determine the current aspect of a landscape. Measuring and representing reality by using specific instruments, specifically created for this purpose, is a practice that derives from the foundation of the first villages and settlements, from the social attribution of functions and roles to men and places (Mumford, 1977).

Different goals have driven landscape measurement and survey operations over time. As a result, multiple data acquisition strategies have been defined and numerous, complex and specific measuring instruments have been designed and implemented. In recent decades, the advances of the digital revolution have significantly transformed the methods of documentation and graphic restitution. The tools of direct surveying have been joined by those of topographic and photogrammetric surveying, which are constantly evolving.

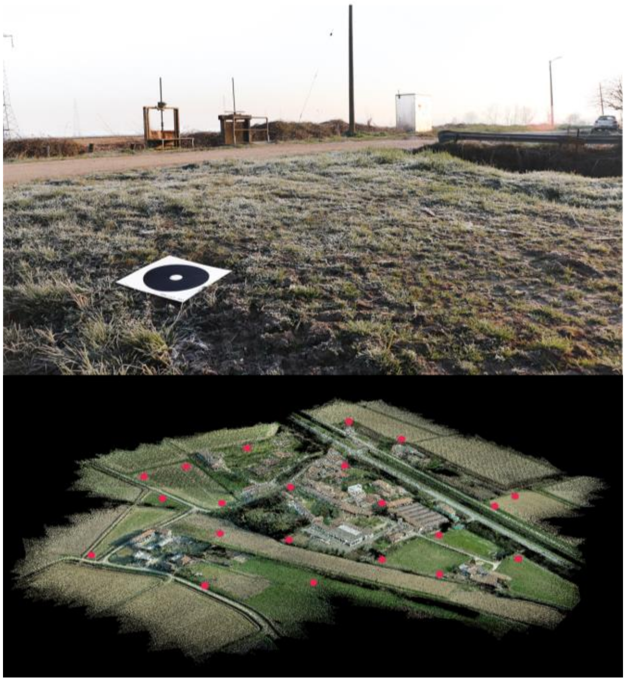

Figure 1. The target positioning in the study area and the database obtained with DJI Phantom RTK.

Technological advances and the recent market availability of photogrammetric acquisition devices and related data processing software have opened new possibilities for the acquisition of heterogeneous multi-level information. Nowadays, there is an ongoing necessity to geographically model our environment and visualise it in three dimensions.
The use of satellite imagery and digital products from high-resolution laser scanners has already had and will continue to have, a significant impact on protocols for the management and enhancement of heritage, both natural and built (Parrinello and Picchio, 2017; Parrinello and Dell'Amico, 2021). Thus, today's surveyor has a wide range of devices and technologies, ground-based and aerial, each with specific technical characteristics, advantages, and limitations, to study the landscape. An in-depth evaluation of acquisition strategies is required to digitally transpose the complexity and multi-scalarity of a landscape.
The preliminary analysis allows the appropriate methodological and instrumental choices to be made, about the spatial qualities of the object of investigation (accessibility, extension, speed of transformation, etc.), the time available, the purpose of the documentation process and the budget available for the research activity. The detailed analysis of a natural environment, however, built, poses several challenges, which increase when the water element is present (Parrinello and La Placa, 2021). Fields, embankments, and riverbeds change with the seasons and according to the agricultural cycles, they undergo.
It is necessary to consider the constant or seasonal flow characteristics of the waterways and the consequent changes in the vegetation. To be able to document these spaces, it is necessary to carry out a multi-scalar survey, which returns distances, angles, and elevations (calibrated to ensure agricultural production) in a single information database. Topographical and hydrographic surveying and the resulting three-dimensional representation over large expanses are dealt with by numerous authors in the literature (Tarolli, 2011; Mahajan and Bundel, 2016; Liang and Delahaye, 2019). Established digital surveying techniques for extensive acquisition include GPS, Total Stations, Terrestrial Laser Scanner (TLS) and Mobile Laser Scanner (MLS) instruments. For several years, LiDAR (Light Detection And Ranging) technology has been increasingly used for topographic mapping in waterscapes (Flener, 2015). The use of all these instruments requires substantial initial funding. Another possibility, however, is offered by aerial photogrammetric surveying. It is now possible to use photographic images from satellites, which can be obtained through special portals, or from drones. In landscape documentation activities, UAV systems have recently gained considerable popularity; compared to the other techniques mentioned above, they offer numerous advantages in terms of cost, versatility, and measurement accuracy (Liang and Delahaye, 2019).

3. RELATED RESEARCHES: UAV FAST SURVEY

UAVs, once an exclusive military domain, is now used for professional applications in a variety of fields, including surveying (Perz and Wronowski, 2018). In particular, among the different types of drones, mini- and micro-UAVs are used for documentation, allowing for operational flexibility and speed of execution. Compared to traditional aerial remote sensing, mini- and micro-UAVs fly at lower altitudes (up to a maximum of 150 m, but often much lower), guaranteeing photogrammetric survey accuracy on the order of a few centimetres. Their use has changed the methodology of spatial image acquisition in just a few years, increasing the digital quality of acquired data and significantly reducing operational costs (Colomina and Molina, 2014).
Several authors deal with the issue of verification and validation of the geometric quality of the photogrammetric point cloud from drone, both at the structural-diagnostic level (Tamakawa and Yamamoto, 2022) and the spatial level (De Marco, 2022; Parrinello, 2019). According to these studies, which illustrate some of the most recent experiments in the field of representation of Cultural Heritage, acquisition methods with UAVs are continuously increasing and rapidly progressing towards obtaining complete and metrically reliable 3D point clouds from which to structure multi-scalar analyses (Yordanov at al., 2022). The setting up of autonomous flight plans and the possibility of defining specific parameters (speed, altitude, ROI - Region of Interest, etc.) allow the operator to safely and in a controlled manner perform acquisitions over large areas in a short time. The recent development of the GPS RTK (Real Time Kinematic) positioning system for drones also provides further application advantages. The system allows real-time satellite positioning and is therefore also used for hydrographic surveys and land surveying, as it guarantees the centimetric accuracy required to produce 3D models and GIS maps.
The data acquired by RTK instruments, appropriately filtered, allow for metrically reliable Digital Terrestrial Models enriched with the colour component. By modifying the height of the flight plane, it is also possible to achieve greater levels of detail, e.g. to visualise in 3D heritage elements of reduced sizes, such as, in the case of irrigated landscapes, hydraulic artefacts (La Placa and Picchio 2022).

4. RELATED RESEARCHES: GIS AND LARGE-SCALE INFORMATION SYSTEMS

The field of geographic information systems (GIS) began in the 1960s with the emergence of computers and the concepts of quantitative and computational geography (Virmani et al., 1997). GIS is a tool to support planning decisions and has the functions of an information system, in which data are geo-referenced.

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Location information is an important component for subsequent spatial and temporal analysis. Geographic information technologies can be classified into four categories: systems for positioning, data acquisition, dissemination and analysis (Goodchild, 2009). Geographic information science is therefore developed to manage and analyze data and was originally based on geomatic technologies. GIS allows spatial information to be stored in a relational database that goes beyond the concept of simply storing data. The attribute information associated with spatial features stored in the database enables further spatial analysis using both spatial and nonspatial attributes (Liu et al., 2017). GIS can implement spatial analysis based on the functional and physical relationships of the outdoor environment at a large scale but lacks a complete digital unique repository of building information that must be integrated independently by the user (Amirebrahimi et al., 2015; Bocconcino and Vozzola, 2022). GIS instrumentation for planning has now been developed for its integrated use with three-dimensional urban models (Biljecki et al., 2015).
A three-dimensional digital city model is a representation using geometries of urban objects and structures (Billen et al., 2014). The model is generated through various acquisition techniques such as, but not limited to, photogrammetry and laser scanning (Parrinello et al, 2016; Suveg and Vosselman, 2004), extrusion from two-dimensional profiles, architectural drawings, use of handheld devices (Sirmacek and Linderberg, 2015). Currently, satellite remote sensing, oblique photography, and light laser detection and ranging (LiDAR) are the main techniques applied to obtain raw data to reconstruct urban/landscape-level models. These methods have different modelling principles and characteristics, including advantages and disadvantages in obtaining data, modelling scale, and modelling accuracy.
Satellite remote sensing can be used for large-scale, low-precision modelling of cities, oblique photography is suitable for producing highly realistic, moderate-precision models, and LiDAR can develop high-precision models with high cost (Xu et al., 2021). As a complement to these methods, close-range photogrammetry, which has low instrumentation costs and allows for vastly faster survey times compared with instrumentation such as ground-based operator-assisted LiDARs, is being used more and more massively (Picchio and Parrinello, 2019).
Based on the minimum level of detail expected and obtained, models are characterized by their level of detail (LOD), which is an indication of their degree of refinement and scale. The LOD implies the intended scope of use for 3D geoinformation, and some use cases require datasets with minimum LOD to be usable. The level of detail, however, is not an unambiguous method of identifying a model, as intermediate scales may be used or the same model may contain portions with different LODs depending on the intended planning needs. Another classification of models can be by use and function (Biljecki et al, 2014) in which, as the purposes vary, the scales of detail and the information contained vary and are considered critical for the GIS composed of the sum of the data to be informative concerning the project objective.

5. METHODOLOGY

The activities carried out in the research involved fast survey, point cloud optimization, modelling of terrain, buildings, and technological elements of the canals, as well as the census of the elements, and integration of all this information into a 4D GIS system. The expeditious documentation activities covered an area of the Pavia plain of about 12 hectares in size. The area under investigation is characterized by the coexistence of different types of cultivation and classes of canalization, as well as by the widespread localization of historical hydraulic artefacts. The extent and presence of features at different scales of magnitude make the area an optimal case study for experimenting with multiscalar survey methodologies. The undertaken processes, aimed at generating information systems useful for managing the irrigated landscape, are based on data acquired quickly and with low-cost instrumentation. These two conditions make the research replicable on a large scale in a short time. The methodology for pursuing the research objective is divided into the three macro-phases described below.

5.1 Fast acquisition with UAVs

The case study analysed, which was chosen in the Pavia plain area because it is characterised by urban aggregates and valuable hydraulic systems, was divided on the map into circumscribed portions. For each portion, an acquisition path for UAV instrumentation was preliminarily planned. Geometric and morphological documentation was conducted in rapid survey mode using a DJI Phantom RTK with Structure from Motion - SfM close-range photogrammetry techniques. Usually, this UAV is used to document wide territories and urban areas, generating a good quality morphometric 3D point cloud (Taddia et al., 2019).

Figure 2. Geometric and morphological documentation was conducted by fast-survey techniques using UAV tools with Structure from Motion close-range photogrammetry.

The experiment conducted aimed to assess whether the same tool would also produce a point cloud of the same quality in the documentation of an irrigated landscape (banks, artificial basins, canals, locks). 14 large photogrammetric targets (50x50 cm) were positioned specifically to increase the number of

common control points between the identified areas. The presence of water from canals and rice fields can generate light refraction effects with consequent problems in the database. To limit the problem as much as possible, the acquisition campaigns were planned by season. In this way, it was possible, taking advantage of the winter months, to acquire the rice fields (which are covered with water in spring and summer) and also some smaller canals that are periodically dried up.
The rationale for the division into areas was based on the performance of the instrument and the minimum flight height, the Ground Sample Distance (GSD) of 1 cm/pix. In particular, due to the presence of trees, suspended cables and other possible interferences, the flight was planned at an altitude between 35 and 40 m above the ground level. Based on the instrument's imaging capability at the identified height and the duration of the batteries in flight, 13 sub-areas were defined, with a margin of overlap between them of at least 10% (Rabah et al., 2018). The fast survey operations were carried out in a short time (a total of 4.5 hours, excluding technical battery charging time). Each sub-area was acquired with the duration of a single battery. Each photo dataset (consisting of almost 350 pictures for the area), was processed on photogrammetry software individually. In each area, the model of the point cloud was generated at the maximum resolution that was possible to obtain. Subsequently, the sub-areas were merged based on the targets set during the acquisition phase and other architectural points identified in the post-production phase. The resulting mesh model represents the entire analysed area with high image resolution. Focusing on the alignment between the sub-areas, the registration error was calculated on the targets, both photogrammetric and morphological, and predicted a maximum error of 0.08 m. To obtain a digital database characterised by a greater level of detail to represent the hydraulic artefacts in the survey area, aerial photogrammetric surveys were combined with documentation activities from the ground, conducted with a manually set Canon EOS 2000D camera.

5.2 Data discretisation and 3D modelling

To translate the complexity of reality into simple forms, into fundamental units (Passamani, 2016), the operator must identify and then catalogue in the digital duplicate: the surfaces, classified by crops; the lines, subdivided by canalization categories; and the points, which include all types of hydraulic artefacts. Once the components of the digital landscape had been identified, a process of discretisation of the duplicates was started about the different LoDs sets. This selection leads to the construction of multi-scalar models for the interpretation of reality. Some elements of the models (unchanged in the main dimensions and shapes) are schematized, while others are reproduced with accuracy and detail. The final three-dimensional product derives from the interpretation, selection, and subsequent sanitization of the survey database. The model must represent a complex landscape, in which urban settlements, systems of crops, water networks, naturalistic elements, road infrastructures, and valuable hydraulic artefacts coexist. To define a discretization criterion for what has been described, the predetermined LoDs were considered, but also the qualitative and historical-cultural aspects of the landscape.
The result is a hybrid model, which combines the territory with the construction detail. From this model, it becomes possible to develop different types of outputs, to the advantage of digital enhancement, as well as the more specific management mechanism. The surfaces were then modelled from the photogrammetric aerial point cloud, starting with the Digital Terrain Model - DTM- extraction.

This method of work extensively studied (Yunfei et al., 2008; Vallet and Papelard, 2015), poses in particular challenges related to the filtering and removal from the cloud of above-ground points (tall vegetation, trees, buildings, etc.); and to the reduction of any error resulting from the registration of two or more overlapping chunks. In the case of the research study, since it is an agricultural area, there are numerous above-ground points to delete before proceeding with the extraction of the DTM. However, after a series of experiments conducted with different databases relating to the same survey area (La Placa, Picchio, 2022), the low-cost fast survey point cloud was considered a suitable working basis for obtaining a complete DTM metrically reliable and easily usable (Ruggiero and Torti, 2019).

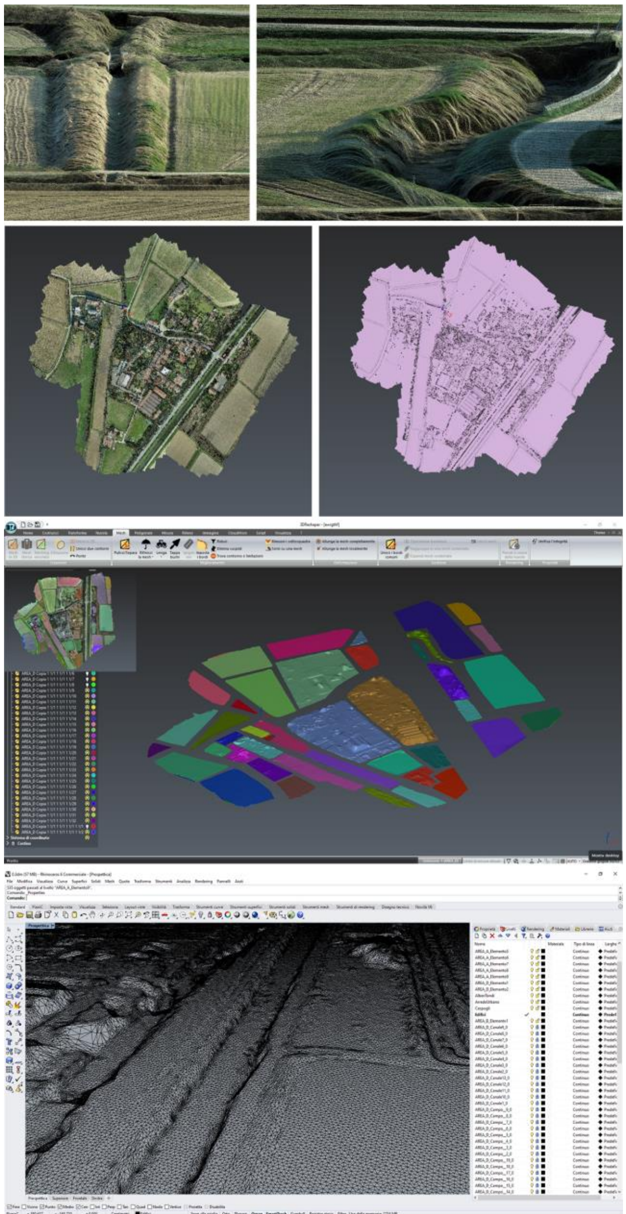

Figure 3. The point clouds obtained had been optimized for the semi-automated extraction of the DTM, where it was decided to use a reduced LoD with respect to architectural and technological elements.

The UAV point clouds obtained had thus been decimated and filtered (using the open-source software Cloud Compare) to retain only representative landscape elements and to proceed with a semi-automated extraction of DTM and models of the built environment with Level of Detail LoD2-3. The obtained DTM lets us understand the differences between fields, roads, and canals and visualize the location of technological elements.

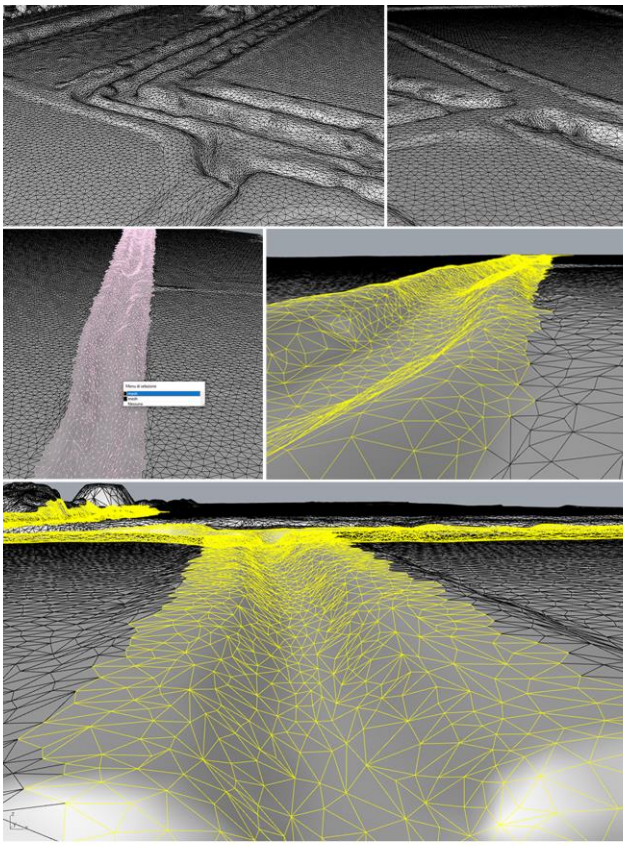

Figure 4. The mesh of the terrain and irrigation canals is divided into layers, which can be selected separately.

These elements are subsequently modelled from point clouds made by SfM technology with photographs from the ground for a better Level of Detail and are divided into minimal units to create an abacus and anthology of standardized recurring elements. Buildings have been modelled, as well as terrain, through a semi-automatic method based on coplanar point recognition to extract surfaces. The final model is composed of surfaces, lines, and points. The latter are modular and can be imported as separate blocks in the terrain model. The standardization of the modular elements makes it easier for technicians to replicate the process of updating and building the model for other areas. The ability to structure the management model quickly and with open-source software makes the entire process sustainable over time, both in terms of personnel costs, tools and programs, and ease of use.

5.3 Composition of the georeferenced information system

The three-dimensional digital model, divided into thematic layers, represents a knowledge base of the landscape. However, it is necessary to proceed with further steps, to make the model useful for the management of irrigation assets. The documentation of technological elements and portions of the landscape was carried out through in situ censuses by filling out interactive forms using tablets (Morandotti, 2021). Various methodologies were tested for the definition of an effective rapid census strategy and the structuring of a cataloguing card. Each definition of fields and descriptors was followed by operational testing of the compilation of the case study. The census card is not structured as a static card but was designed through the use of relational databases.

The objectives that the filing had to meet were high usability to encourage its use even in non-academic settings; rapid data entry; compilation in the field with handheld tools; and the updatability of information over time. The census card is thus an interactive system of information that can be easily updated and integrated into subsequent census campaigns, such as to build a dynamic database (Doria et al., 2022).

Some of the aspects of primary importance in the development of this census method are: the choice of information considered necessary by the technician and administrations to fully describe the environment; the choice of interfaces that allow the census filling to operators with different cultural backgrounds; the analysis of the situations to the context in which the operator performs the census; the analysis of what should be delegated to the system understood as software and what to the compiler.

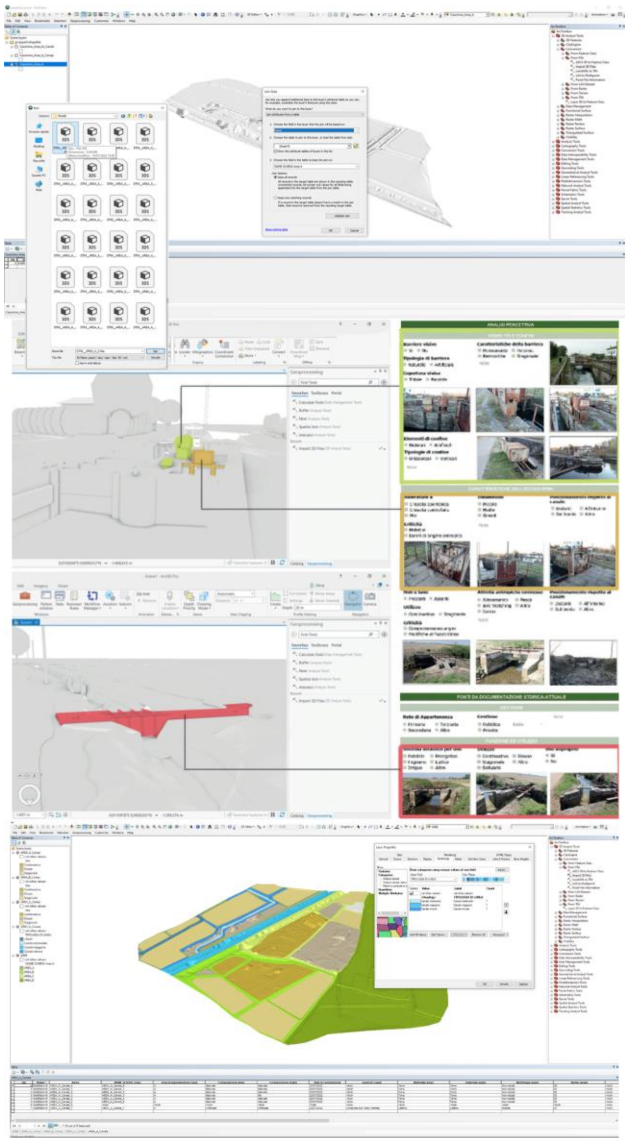

Figure 5. The census was implemented as a relational database and exportable as a tabular file; each card is associated with a unique code that represents the corresponding model.

The census is currently developed by populating the relational database management system – RDBMS that stores data in a row-based table structure - data storage and query systems within records through the data entry platform-record generation. The census described regards different areas of research and different disciplinary fields, from alteration mapping to data collection for urban functional planning, always considering fast analysis and reduction of work time.

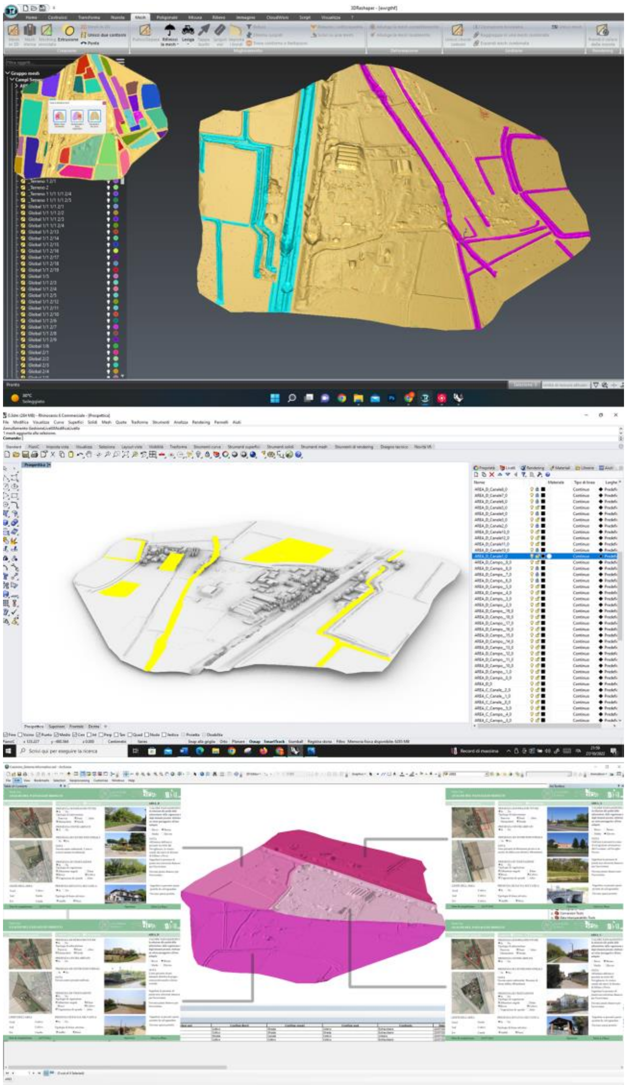

Figure 6. Images of models and census integrated on an information system platform – ESRI ArcSCENE.

The aspect of interest, however, is not only the quantitative richness of the data that can be collected but the fact that these can be queried and computed in a database, extracting specific summaries based on the queries (Xu et al., 2021). Data linkage between the census and the model is done by importing both into a GIS platform, where the model becomes the basis of a queryable and updatable tool. At this research stage, the conducted census is connected with the three-dimensional digital models made to proceed with the structuring of computerized models of reality. In particular, the aspect of geo-referenced information systems - GIS was explored.
Highly reliable morphometric modelling products derived from digital surveys, imported into the GIS system, must contain the data that allows them to be linked to the additional information acquired in the diagnostic and census phases, such as, for example, the unique codes of the element files. Thus, a connection between the model surfaces and the census relational database must be ensured to manage the information acquired in an entity-relationship model.

The subdivision into layers of the model imported into the GIS (terrain with canals, trees, built volumes, roads, hydraulic elements, etc.) is maintained by the information platform and highlights the cataloguing by map elements. For the populating of the database and the three-dimensional visualization of the information, it was necessary to define a method to operate the dialogue between the model and the database enclosing the documentation information. The method has been developed so that the following protocols can be guaranteed to be functional:
1. integration of the census DB data directly from the database (DB) management software itself, with the possibility of updating the data in the case of periodic inspections, without compromising previous values and creating a temporal hierarchy between the cards, historicizing the data without the need to restructure the data entry interface each time;
2. updating the three-dimensional model in case of changes in the architectural environment, reducing action time, and using open-source software;
3. automation of the linkage between the three-dimensional model in the information system and the census DB, with immediate verification of consistency between the two systems and decreasing operators' work time;
4. inclusion in the GIS also of past census stages, photo archives, or other information collected in the diagnostic phase thanks to specific DB value fields and hyperlinks, displaying all information in one system.
Two different GIS platforms for structuring the information system were tested. The first involved a high-budget solution using ESRI ArcGIS Pro/ArcSCENE software. In contrast, to develop an information system that was accessible without licensing charges, importing onto QGIS software, Open-Source Geographic Information System, released under the GNU General Public License, was tested.

6. RESULTS AND CRITICALITIES

The digital information system obtained allows different uses according to the type of users, including those inherent to the facilitation of heritage management by public Administrations or Associations active in the area. The structure of the census card is subdivided by fields that, following a logic of partition, allows the analysis of the landscape starting from its general characters and arriving at the detail of the hydraulic elements. In particular, the latter has been included in an abacus that has the function of a legend for the three-dimensional map.
The abacus, structured as a catalogue, makes explicit the character of these point works through a brief dimensional and material description flanked by a 3D representation of them and serves the purpose of being able to have an account of them quickly and effectively. The link in the geo-referenced information system allows the representation to be enriched, giving the possibility of precisely locating the model and allowing it to be able to make a rapid analysis by fields. The result of the process presented in this contribution is a model consisting of components of different scales of detail. Linked to each element is information acquired from the *in situ* censuses, represented through text, images, and external links.
The process of computerization of the model was managed on two different software, allowing advantages and disadvantages to be established for each. The information system managed with the QGIS software allows free use of the system by the end user, however, it can only be managed locally. In contrast, the use of the information system in ESRI does not allow open access use, but it guarantees the fruition of the product via a cloud network that can be shared with different users and updated in real-time.

The Georeferenced Information System produces the minimum results expected with both software and can be proposed to administrations and agencies in the platform that best meets budgets and intended use. However, it is critical to consider that the model and information can be exported and imported from one software to another via shape files. The process to define the georeferenced information system showed critical issues mainly related to the topic of low-cost experimentation in the data post-production phase. The need to have hardware capable of handling the point clouds and models created has an initial impact on purchasing tools. However, the cost is balanced by using low-cost instrumentation for acquisition and the ability to carry out the entire process using open-source software.

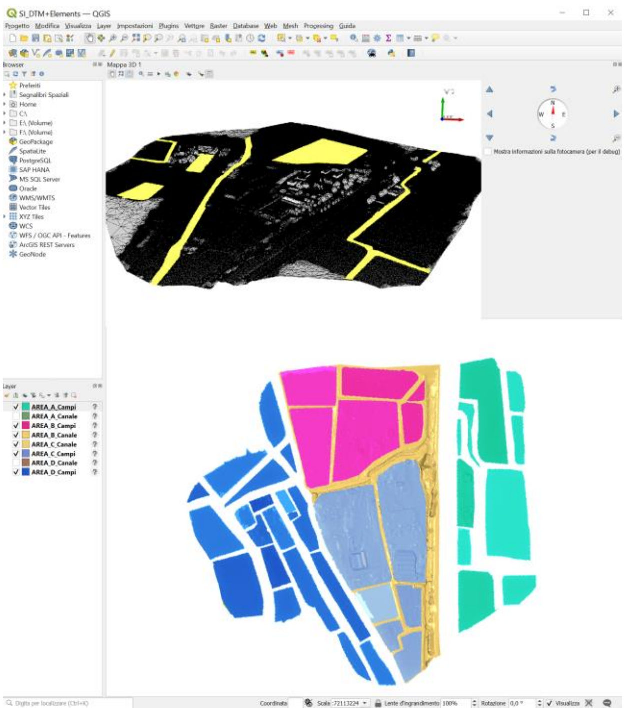

Figure 7. Images of models and census integrated on the open-source information system platform – QGIS.

7. FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The present research has tried to define a replicable low-cost methodology to have in a short time an easy-to-manage multiscale information system based on a UAV photogrammetric database. The experiments and comparisons have made it possible to obtain a valid information model, from which to deepen and develop knowledge of the irrigation and agricultural landscape and its cultural elements. Communicating this richness and complexity is the next essential step in its preservation. The research product currently makes it possible to facilitate the management of the irrigation landscape at multiple levels. If queried, the system provides information on ownership, actual size, water flow, crop types and boundaries. The model and the cards also provide detailed information on the location, type, and state of conservation of hydraulic manufacts. However, the current information model only makes explicit some of the information it could potentially contain. The possibility of increasing the level of dynamism and interaction between the real landscape and its digital duplicate invites us to foresee further future developments. In this sense, one of the next objectives concerns the connection of the digital platform with active sensors placed along the main water canals, some of which are already present. The connection could make it possible to transform the model into a dynamic tool within a wider monitoring system, opening the way to multiple considerations on future real-digital interactions.

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