

TOWARDS A NEW RESILIENCE CULTURE

Relational design and workshops of social innovation for fragile areas in central-southern Italy

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ABSTRACT

Throughout Italy, there are marginalized settlements often experiencing depopulation phenomena. These places are mostly located in mountainous or island areas, far from large urban cities and their infrastructural roads and, despite a consistent population decline, are still home to a fourth of the Italian population. These data are sufficient to make these peripheral areas the centre of a great national issue, to which a new concept of design of relations, systems, processes and products can stop a negative social and economic trend. This essay aims to highlight strategic scenarios and examples of good practices of relational design on this subject, that were already implemented or that are being implemented, particularly focusing on central-southern Italy.

KEYWORDS

resilience, participation, fragile areas, social design, design for territories

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Due to its morphology and its unique stratification of socio-economic phenomena, in Italy there are small marginal settlements, often lacking in public services and characterized by depopulation processes. These peripheral places, more specifically called ‘inner areas’ or ‘fragile areas’, include areas that are far from big and medium-sized cities and their infrastructural roads or those with serious and permanent environmental disadvantages, many rural areas and border, island or mountain territories (Fig. 1). On the one hand, one meaning of peripherality is purely spatial, according to the model centre-periphery that influences the transfer of goods and people, and the variation in time of their settlements (Salvatore and Chiodo, 2017); on the other, the socio-economic literature tends to increasingly highlight the parallel existence of a new idea of peripherality, an a-spatial kind (Copus, Mantino and Noguera, 2017). The development of ICT infrastructures (Information and Communication Technologies) has, indeed, led to the modification of the concept of spatial proximity and the gradual transformation of the environment where the interactions between individuals take place, depending increasingly on immaterial flows.

In this context, distances, times, travel costs and infrastructural problems are no longer sufficient indicators to unambiguously define peripherality and the impossibility of establishing social, cultural and economic relations due to insufficient or lacking digital connectivity, today, is a fully-fledged indicator of those areas defined as disadvantaged due to an a-spatial periphery. In Italy, the problem of peripheral areas was highlighted and addressed in the NSIA (National Strategy for Inner Areas), an intervention project developed in 2012 by the Department for the Economic Development and Cohesion. This plan, thanks to shared policies of connection and aggregation of territories and communities, aims to reversing the phenomenon of depopulation of the so-called ‘inner areas’ – the areas affected in many ways by processes of spatial and a-spatial marginalization.

The NSIA defines national inner areas as places at a varying distance from the main essential service centres, such as education, health and mobility, located in an area deeply diversified by specific environmental characteristics and by centuries-old anthropization processes (Barca, Casavola and Lucatelli, 2014). At the same time, these places have natural and landscape resources, archaeological sites, historic settlements and traditional crafts intrinsically rich in potentials that the Policy imposes to consider and promote (Fig. 2). Many of these areas, especially the mountain, up-hill and rural areas have experienced a gradual process of de-anthropization caused by socio-cultural and economic factors, with a reduction in employment and land use for production purposes which was counterbalanced by an increase in the population ageing.

As a consequence, the quantity and quality of the local offer of public services have decreased, and in a cascade, the social costs linked to the hydrogeological instability and the deterioration of the cultural and landscape heritage have increased. However, the inner areas are not all uniquely characterized by the dominant tendency of depopulation and deterioration. Some of them are increasingly experiencing repop-

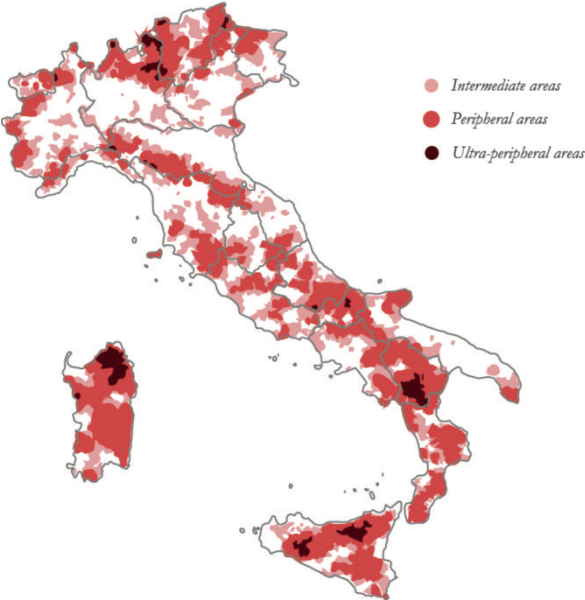


Fig. 1 | The ‘fragile’ geography of Italy: new version after NSIA data by the authors (credit: M. Manfra, 2018).

Fig. 2 | The village of Scanno (L’Aquila), a ‘fragile’ settlement listed among the most beautiful villages in Italy (credit: C. Olesiniski, 2017).





Fig. 3 | Cloud view of possible design scenarios of enhancement of fragile areas (credit: M. Manfra and D. Turrini, 2019).

ulation and regeneration situations in a positive counter-trend to the general phenomenon (Cersosimo, Ferrara and Nisticò, 2018).

In some territories, in fact, it can be observed how the population has stabilized, even grown, thanks to environmental and cultural enhancement projects. In these cases, we are talking about veritable counter-stories (Curci and Lanzani, 2018) marked by innovative services such as call-a-bus mobility, pharmacies and community first aid points, village caregivers, kindergartens in the woods or agro-kindergartens promoting eco-literacy, networks of sustainable and experiential tourism, local supply chains for the protection and promotion of agri-food systems and artisan knowledge.

Thus, thanks to the redesign of processes and services, some fragile areas rise, joining active citizens already living there or that have settled back in town, small local administrations, cooperatives or individual entrepreneurs capable of experimenting with good adaptive and resilient policies and practices. By intertwining values linked to the care of relations between individuals and the environment, such as solidarity, awareness of history and respect for nature, these new forms of community claim back places and recreate projects and circular economies where the concept of capital is also a social and cultural matter (Zurlo, 2012; Fig. 3).

Design for fragile areas within design for the territories | At the turning of the third millennium, an increasing number of goods and services quotas have been created, produced and distributed through a long linear value chain. Global flows of people, assets, goods and information have an impact on the territories, often changing radi-

cally their socio-economic systems, more quickly than in the past, and ultimately changing their aspect. As discussed in the case of fragile Italian areas, the communities 'disperse' and the spaces become 'empty', characterized by important absences of various kinds, yet particularly suitable to welcome people interested in the values of a new consciousness of places and wanting to experience them both as temporary for recreational and experiential use, and as stable residential and productive settlements (Becattini, 2015).

In the contemporary age, the position of the designer has also changed: design is no longer an area clearly and uniquely associated with De Fusco's four-leaf clover (design, production, sale, consumption) but takes on a new, more complex and somehow nuanced role, turned into a lever of development and innovation intended as a change of perspective from long-term problems. The designer works in a much more complex context than past contexts and is increasingly focused on human and social aspects. The role of the contemporary designer is, therefore, «[...] to act, discover, react, design rehabilitating solutions and scenarios, to interact, involve people, create opportunities to connect with others» (Fagnoni, 2018, p. 17).

Designers are no longer just drafters but are rather known as mediators, or 'actants' capable of creating, experimenting and adapting, both in the material and in the immaterial world (Fagnoni, 2018); they become the creators of alternatives that, thanks to co-design techniques, put the real needs of the territory, the community or the individual at the heart of each project. Therefore, design can come out of a purely authorial dimension and can become a common tool, practised by people from different disciplinary backgrounds, or by citizens lacking specific training courses. Indeed, Victor Papanek, a pioneer of social and sustainable design, mentions how creativity and the ability to project design are inherent in every person. He wrote: «[...] all that we do, almost all the time, is design, for design is basic to all human activity. The planning and patterning, according to a fixed model, of any act towards a desired, foreseeable end constitutes the design process. Design is also cleaning and reorganizing a desk drawer, painting a masterpiece, and educating a child. Design is the conscious effort to impose meaningful order. Design can and must become a way in which young people can participate in changing society» (Papanek, 1973, p. 15).

Therefore, the designer will have the task to give first-person solutions, but mostly to mediate, stimulate, assist this widespread inclination to design, by strengthening bonds, relations and co-operation among the individuals of a community. So, visionaries, proactive citizens, cultural entrepreneurs ready to invest time and resources, illuminated institutions and professional designers have a challenge in common: to develop the organizational capacity and to create relations capable of triggering sustainable processes, services, economies and supply chains in favour of a strong new identity (Villari, 2013). To design for the enhancement of fragile areas, with its strategic, immaterial and shared features, works in the context of the so-called Design for the Territories which can be considered «[...] now close to historicization, since it is an ex-



Fig. 4 | Spontaneous moments of community interaction near Frattura wash house (credit: M. Manfra, 2019).



Fig. 5 | The former elementary school of Frattura, now the museum of local history and identity (credit: C. Mam-mucari, 2018).

perimentation ground widely used through [...] strategic visions and localized communication, production and service processes» (Parente, Lupo and Sedini, 2017, p. 3).

From capitalization to shared complex identities | Over the last decades, mostly in fragile areas, has prevailed a cultural paradigm in which local development and identity enhancement were essentially conceived as capitalization of the assets and historic resources of the territories. This extremely traditional vision has left its mark in the imagination of local administrations, communities and designers leading to focus creational and economic efforts on some recurring themes such as eco-museums, events linked to traditions and typical products, and thematic routes of various kinds. Designing has become a mere sequence of assets to enhance or processes aimed only to musealization, or purely tourism promotion communication operations, and the initial search for diversified identities has turned into the schematic repetition of homologated and homologating images and imagination. In many cases, administrations have chased a sort of contemporary Retrotopia (Bauman, 2017), as if a specific country or landscape was the product of an immediate aesthetic request and not of a complex and stratified transformative process, missing the real, profound, ‘endogenous’ values and opportunities of an all-round revitalization of the communities (De Rossi, 2018).

Therefore, the paradox of capitalization, and the idea of development focused only on tourism, has led in many cases to separate the ‘formal’ issue from the ‘structural’ one, preventing the creation of virtuous relations between the aesthetic of places aimed at immediate enjoyment and appreciation by visitors, and the structural condition of long-term habitability of the territory. For some decades, however, we have witnessed the implementation of innovative local projects that do not fall within the aforementioned conceptual scope and practice more a socio-cultural regeneration than a spatial and economic one, with the aim of returning to merge formal and structural matters. It is a unique approach to design for the territories that we want to put at the

core of this paper since it is capable of achieving not only the enhancement of tangible or intangible assets but mainly the complex and lasting ‘buen vivir’ of a place or a system of places, intended as a collectivist and relational biocentrism concept (Morelli and Sbordone, 2018).

One example that can help to understand the scope of this criterion is the Austrian region of Vorarlberg where, since the early 2000s, an ecological culture shared by citizens and administrations has allowed the spreading of environmental management projects, sustainable mobility, bio-architecture in relation to the real availability of local wood materials and, mostly, to soft tourism and participatory social innovation (Tonolini, 2015). In addition to capitalization, it is possible to think of more complex projects, capable of giving more incisive and effective answers to the problems of the inner areas, triggering new circular economies and the definition of new, or improved, identities; to this purpose, design knowledge must intertwine social, economic, and environmental disciplines, rural sciences, architecture and design, with the aim of conceiving and creating holistic regenerative solutions and building/rebuilding shared cultural values (Mela, Belloni and Davico, 2000).

Memory and agriculture: the case study of Frattura | A weighty and enduring territorial enhancement underlies systemic projects that activate relations between every social and cultural component of a settlement. In this regard, there are two relevant case studies of recent implementation. They are allowing a full promotion, capable of bringing ‘cascading’ benefits in particularly fragile areas of Centre and Southern Italy, triggering virtuous impacts on the rebirth of community identity, on the revitalization of local economic systems and the quantitative and qualitative increase in tourist flows.

The first unpublished case is the one of Frattura (L’Aquila) a village in Abruzzo of 48 citizens located within the Natural Reserve Gole del Sagittario at 1,260 masl. There, after decades of abandonment due to earthquakes and economic migrations, the citizens have actively participated in a mission of historical-social documentation called Fluturnum, Archaeology and Anthropology in the Upper Sagittarius Valley, fostered by the University of Bologna, Scanno Municipality and the Matrix96 cooperative (Del Fattore, Rizzo and Felici, 2018). Within this project, in the community has emerged the will to regain its lost identity through practices of co-designing led by the citizens, anthropologists and designers from different educational backgrounds that have worked on the regeneration of abandoned public spaces and the recovery of an ancient local agri-food supply chain.

Research, knowledge and enhancement of historic economic and material heritage processes, have been strategic levers to undertake development policies consistent with the needs of local people. Initially, the regeneration has focused on the wash house of the village, a historic fulcrum-agera of the community that has been restored, put into operation and put at the centre of new events and social relations, with popular songs and recurring events of personal memories stories (Fig. 4). «[...] The wash



Fig. 6 | Frattura White Bean, Slow Food Presidia (credit: A. Rizzo, 2018).

Fig. 7 | Coordinated image to promote the White Bean (credit: A. Rizzo, 2018).

Fig. 8 | Harvesting moments of Frattura White Bean (credit: A. Rizzo, 2019).

Fig. 9 | Frattura White Bean, from drying to beating in the village (credit: A. Rizzo, 2017).

house represents a space strongly linked to the history of women in Frattura, to the feminization of the population following the migration of men after the aftermath of World War II. It carries social practices and putting it into operation means releasing the places of memory and creativity» (Giannetti, 2018, p. 1).

Then, the renovation has involved the oven and finally the disused school which now welcomes historic heritage of local life and production culture, in a path designed and set up by the citizens, that is moderately popular with tourists (Fig. 5). The anthropologist Anna Rizzo, director of the project, affirmed that «[...] mapping history, recovering the intangible heritage and the intangible knowledge of a community is an extensive job, which requires a codified method and has a civil role. However, if disused spaces are regenerated, they can become places of social, intellectual and educational enjoyment, intercepting the increasing demand for cultural tourism and stimulating simultaneous economic initiatives» (Rizzo, 2019, p. 1). But the rebirth of this settlement did not involve only the community recovery and relational revitalization of some symbolic places. An area called Aruccia, the oldest part of the village largely destroyed by the earthquake in Marsica in 1915, was recovered and promoted by the industry of the Frattura White Bean, a bean that grows only there, at high altitude, and has recently been listed in the Slow Food Ark of Taste (Fig. 6).

Even the bean is an element of continuity between past and present and it is the only local good that has survived the decline and has been transformed into an economic opportunity that is expanding and involves the young people of Frattura (Fig. 7). It is produced by natural farming and with conservative and traditional practices. With thanks to a specific project, every year, the ritual takes place: planting seeds, farming, harvesting (Fig. 8) and, finally, drying and cleaning by beating on a mosaic of cloths that in September make the image of the streets and squares of Frattura unique, attracting many tourists (Fig. 9).

Art and education: Favara as an example | Another case of design practice particularly fitting on this subject is the municipality of Favara (Agrigento), which had a significant socio-economic decline in the second half of the twentieth century. Greek colony founded in the second century BC, Favara has had Byzantine, Arab and Norman dominations that have left valuable traces in its cultural heritage, and in its building fabric made of ancient houses, palaces, intricate alleys and large courtyards. In 2010, in the old town that has been abandoned, a couple of residents, Andrea Bartoli and Florinda Saieva, purchased and restored old buildings known as the Sette Cortili (Seven Courtyards), creating the first nucleus of what quickly became a cultural centre called Farm Cultural Park (Fig. 10).

In doing so, with the intention of planning a new future for their town and the whole local community without waiting for the intervention of public institutions, the couple has started a complex process of «[...] recovery and re-appropriation of local values, by redefining them through new ways of thinking and living» (Della Lucia and

Fig. 10 | Farm Cultural Park in Favara
(credit: www.farmculturalpark.com,
2019).



Fig. 11 | Contemporary art and life in
the old town of Favara (credit: I. Maz-
zeo, 2018).





Fig. 12 | SOU, the School of Architecture for Children in Favara (credit: www.farmculturalpark.com, 2019).

Trunfio, 2018, p. 40). From the Seven Courtyards, a hub has developed over 6,000 square metres in which coexist: spaces for cultural meetings, permanent and temporary exhibitions, areas for street art, ateliers and artist residences, architecture, graphics and web design studios, art galleries, community kitchens and artistic craft shops.

In the old town completely redeveloped, there are also welcoming spaces for artists and designers of different backgrounds that are periodically hosted by the community and, thanks to co-design practices, work to the improvement of dwellings as well as to the planning of events and relational processes between citizens and between citizens and tourists (Fig. 11). Finally, the Farm Cultural Park is the heart of many educational activities, starting from the experimental teaching rooms of the Children's Museum where the training of the School of Architecture for Children takes place, there, for example, the children can develop free thought, creativity, a sense of place and the culture of 'do it yourself' (Fig. 12). Thanks to the small networks coming from the artistic-cultural-educational industry, linked to experiential tourism, Favara has become an important centre for social innovation workshops that have an influence outside its local area and invest in increasingly diversified social and economic industries.

The restorative model of Favara has created, in fact, «[...] spillover effects inspiring other members of communities, individually or in new associations, to create their own activities, starting other urban restorative projects or getting involved in the

Farm, now funded by hundreds of people» (Della Lucia and Trunfio, 2018, p. 40). Today, people are returning, purchasing second homes, starting new production and promotion activities of local food and wine; and among the spillover projects, the Community cooperative Farmidabile is a perfect example; it deals with the free transfer of properties and skills to young people who want to start new businesses or farms.

Conclusions: the relational design towards a new resilient design culture | By observing the two symbolic restorative examples of Frattura and Favara we can identify three large fields of research and work to make relational design be successful with settlements and communities: the one on economic activities linked to the new agriculture and craftsmanship, the one on artistic-cultural based enhancements, the one on soft and sustainable tourism. Three fields that in the case studies analysed are considered entwined with gradients of different importance to define a new way to understand the development of fragile areas, that goes beyond the single part (object), to recreate flows and relations of values, things and people. These practices, perfectly moulded on local needs and almost exclusively of non-institutional origin, need—as mentioned at the beginning—the presence of a ‘bricoleur’ or ‘moderator’ designer, capable of working according to recurring strategies that we want to analyse below, starting from the categorization created by Antonio De Rossi (2018) in his recently published book *Riabitare l’Italia—Le aree interne tra abbandoni e riconquiste* (Living again in Italy—inner areas between state of abandon and reconquest).

In the literature, one strategy is called ‘points system’ – a series of interventions made in different and scattered points that, linked in a network, create new spaces used by the community or immaterial new situations. For example, it is the case of the above-mentioned Favara, but also Belmonte Calabro and, with necessary variations, the artistic interventions made to liven up the public space in Dozza in Emilia-Romagna, Civitacampomariano in Molise (Fig. 13), San Potito Sannitico in Campania, Aielli in Abruzzo. Another model is the so-called Block System: once the difficulties in a widespread revitalization are noted, a central system is strengthened by drawing the attention on an important spatial element such as a square, a street or a set of rural ruins. For instance, the restoration can pass through the building of a scattered hotel or hostel, as with Matera, Quaglietta, Castelvetere sul Calore in Irpinia or in Santo Stefano di Sessanio in Abruzzo. Even the previous block system can have different forms (for example for linear axes) and can be on different territorial scales, as with the recovery of disused railways, where stops create new hubs (De Rossi and Mascino, 2018).

Another strategy is called ‘object-magnet’, and it is similar to the previous one but less focused on spatiality and concerns the building of a symbolic, attractive and often hybrid place, around which a net of relations can be created. For example, the poles where ancient productions and/or processes are reactivated, linked to the territory, agricultural markets with farm-to-table products or multifunctional spaces managed by local cooperatives or fair trade purchasing groups (Teneggi, 2018; Fig. 14). A



fourth strategy is called ‘small nets’ and can be referred mostly to short production chains and provides for the design of small nets of places, close to each other, to produce and sell tangible goods or to develop workshops for non-formal education and social inclusion (Fig. 15).

One last strategy can be placed in the concept of ‘erode neglect’ and is implemented by designers when «[...] the quantitative mass of the neglected space exceeds a specific critical threshold, and at the same time, the resources to restore the place are limited, thus requiring a necessary progressive action, reactivating only some strategic points by making them enjoyable» (De Rossi, 2018, p. 520). A perfect example is the proposal by Japanese architects Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, presented in 1997 for the recovery of the old town of Salerno and based on a few intervention points considered fundamental to trigger the spreading of the regeneration process to other centres, even simply by flows of things and people.

The strategies that have been described so far can be used as effective tools even if they require a holistic and cross-disciplinary design rethinking, which is already taking place, in some cases, but it needs further improvement and dissemination. In this regard, increasingly rapid bottom-up and user-centred approaches are fundamental,



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Fig. 13 | Alice Pasquini, street artist, checks the result of one of his works in Civitacampomariano, Campobasso (credit: J. Stewart, 2016).

Fig. 14 | The first community mill in Castiglione d'Otranto, Lecce (credit: A. Corciulo, 2019).

Fig. 15 | Local artisans meeting migrants in Belmonte Calabro, Cosenza (credit: www.larivoluzionedellesepie.org, 2019).



which through negotiation processes can include social and entrepreneurial subjects, fully considering their complexity. Such a prospect seems thriving for cultural and economic aspects, by redefining identity values and triggering new circular economies. Ultimately, it is a matter of changing some design regulations, gradually introjecting resilience, adaptability and mitigation of environmental and social problems criteria, while building new shared meanings for the future, which are deeply rooted in memory.

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