



## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Community-led approaches and interventions for the regeneration of abandoned towns in southern Italy

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**Abstract** - Defined as towns or villages that have been abandoned by their original inhabitants, the so-called 'ghost towns' are a sub-product of the opposing conditions of excessive urban growth in one hand and decline of rural regions on the other. Natural disasters, economic and demographic decline, armed conflict, disease and environmental contamination are repeatedly the drivers for their abandonment. An increasing large concentration of these abandoned small villages is found in the impoverished Southern regions of Italy. To investigate this problem and identify conservation approaches that could generate new dynamics to the abandoned historic villages, the paper starts by identifying the linkages between globalisation, rapid urbanisation and ghost towns. This is followed by an analysis of the root causes of ghost towns in an attempt to define a ghost town typology. With this in mind, this paper investigates integrated conservation approaches, which could promote the restoration of abandoned towns, strengthening their local identity and enhancing resource-efficient local economies. Based on these considerations, the paper focus the attention on three scenarios of rehabilitation: a community-led approach to conservation demonstrated by the medieval village Torri Superiore embedded in ecovillage principles; the hospitality concept albergo diffuso demonstrated by Albergo Diffuso Borgo di Castelvetere, acting as social, cultural and economic stimuli to depopulated villages; the Riace village humanitarian approach which has integrated migrants in the social fabric of its aging population. The paper ends by reflecting if Torri Superiore and Riace's approaches offer a potential solution to the housing crises currently engulfing southern Europe. As a result of imaginative housing and food production practices, these villages have made significantly more progress than mainstream government approaches towards the realisation of sustainable communities by strengthening social cohesion, addressing climate change vulnerabilities, breaking the cycle of food insecurity, and improving housing status.

**Keywords** – abandoned towns, regeneration, southern Italy, community

Received: February 25, 2016

Accepted: March 5, 2016

### Introduction

'Where there is ruin, there is hope for a treasure.' (Rumi, 13th Century)

The past century has been one of unprecedented change in terms of impact on the urban environment. Globalisation, rapid unrestrained development, demographic changes, and economic pressures are the main factors driving change in the urban environment<sup>i</sup>. In 2007, for the first time in history, the global urban population exceeded the global rural population.<sup>ii</sup> The world population has remained predominantly urban ever since. In 2014, Europe ranked the third most urbanised region of the world, with 73 per cent of its population living in urban areas.<sup>iii</sup>

The diverging trends of rapid urban expansion and decline, stagnation and even abandonment of smaller settlements and remote rural villages<sup>iv</sup> reflect larger social,

economic, and cultural changes that have shaped Europe in recent decades. One consequence of urbanisation is increasing numbers of so-called 'ghost towns': formerly thriving towns or villages now abandoned by their original inhabitants, whether due to natural disaster or for economic, demographic, environmental or infrastructural reasons. A large concentration of these abandoned small villages can be found in the Southern regions of Italy. A combination of minimal maintenance and slow decay of fragile constructions,<sup>v</sup> and national and regional governments' failure to protect historic settlements in accordance to the Code of Cultural and Landscape Heritage,<sup>vi</sup> makes the conservation of uninhabited historic urban landscapes in Southern Italy a complex cultural challenge

Concomitantly the availability of the depopulated historic settlements presents many opportunities, in particular, when considered in conjunction with the emergence of community-led initiatives exploring resilient lifestyle

choices, new ownership structures and livelihood strategies<sup>vii</sup>, and in concurrence with the upsurge in housing demand by significant influxes of migrants and refugees entering Europe via Southern Italy.

### Ghost Towns: Causes of Abandonment

*'Filled with the presence of absences. What appears designates what is no more... what can no longer be seen.'* (Certeau, 1990)

Throughout history and across many countries thousands of towns were abandoned for a variety of reasons. A town often becomes a ghost town because the natural resources and economic activity that supported its existence have failed to endure. Natural disasters such as earthquakes, landslides, floods and fires, government neglect, armed

Baker describes a ghost town as a town for which the reason for being no longer exists.<sup>ix</sup> Florin poetically defines a ghost town as *"a shadowy semblance of its former self"*.<sup>x</sup> Di Figlia adds *'the uninhabited village can be considered both as a discarded element of the modern consumer society and as a regional asset, reinterpreted from a qualifying perspective'*.<sup>xi</sup>

### Ghosts Towns in Italy

In Italy the number of abandoned small villages is progressively increasing with over 5.000 on the whole Italian territory<sup>xii</sup> and a large concentration found in the impoverished and seismically active portions of the Southern regions along the Central-Southern Apennines. Di Figlia has identified 135 towns abandoned during the 20 and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries,<sup>xiii</sup> while the Department of

**Table 1: Causes of Abandonment of Towns in US, Europe, Australia and Italy**

	Combined Causes	Country	Source
<b>Natural Causes</b>			
Landslide	Thistle, 1983 Craco, 1963	US Italy	US Geological Survey Italian Statistical Institute
Earthquake	Castelvetere sul Calore (Irpinia), 1980 Pentedattilo, 1783	Italy	Civil Protection Department Province of Reggio Calabria
Flood & Dam Break	Curon Venosta, 1950	Italy	South Tyrol / Südtirol Info
Sand Storm	Kenfig, Bridgend, 13 <sup>th</sup> Century	UK	The Official Kenfig Community History Project
Fire	Centralia, 1962 - ongoing	USA	Smithsonian Magazine, 2005
<b>Depletion of Natural Resources and Subsequent Closure of Industries</b>			
Toxic	Wittenoom, 1993	Australia	Western Australia Department of Lands
Potable Water	Alton, 1856	USA	Handbook of Texas Online
Coal Mines	Bothwellhaugh, 1960	UK	Scottish Mining Website
Silver Mines	Argentiera, 1963 Silverton- ongoing	Italy Australia	Regione Autonoma de Sardigna Australian Bureau of Statistics
Gold Mines	Bannack, 1940	USA	Montana Ghost Town Preservation Society
Oil Industries	Denoya, 1942	USA	Oklahoma History Center
Lumber	Singapore, 1875	USA	History of Manistee County, Michigan
Poor Agricultural Conditions	Schiro, 2000	Italy	University of Catania

conflict, disease and environmental contamination are repeatedly the drivers for abandonment. Often it is a combination of factors that cause the town to lose its population, fading away in time and transforming itself into a place held only in the memory of those who lived there.

There are multiple ways to define ghost towns. For Brown a true ghost town is a location where buildings still stand even though population no longer exists.<sup>viii</sup>

Agriculture, Food and Environment, at University of Catania confirms that, in Sicily alone, there are over 80 abandoned agricultural villages.<sup>xiv</sup>

Statistical research conducted in 2008 identified 1.650 municipalities at risk of becoming ghost towns by 2016, unable to reach the minimum threshold of 'survival' in the demographic, social, economic and services categories.<sup>xv</sup> These settlements represent one-fifth of Italian municipalities; one-sixth of the land area; 4.2% of

the population and 2.1% of Italian workers. Research findings provide a striking evidence of the current fragility of rural economies in Italy. It also points out the need to find systemic solutions for the rehabilitation of historic urban centers that could be tested and scaled up to prevent a total rural exodus.

Southern Italy has suffered many earthquakes between 1930's and 1980's. The combination of such natural disasters and a weak economy provided villagers with an opportunity to radically reshape their way of life, with the prospect of switching from a largely rural and agricultural lifestyle to one based on a more modern urban life.<sup>xvi</sup> In many instances the original town relocated to a nearby site and the abandoned settlement incorporated a new adjective 'Vecchio' or 'Old' to its name: Caianello Vecchia, Apice Vecchia and Alianenello Vecchio.

Poor farming, earthquakes, landslides, and war, all contributed to a mass migration of Craco's population to North America between 1892 and 1922. In 1963, a landslide caused the evacuation of the remaining 1,800 inhabitants to a nearby valley called Craco Peschiera while the original Craco remained in a state of crumbling decay. In other cases the ruins of the ghost cities were given a second life as artist communities or as refuges for migrants.

Pentedattilo is a ghost town on the Monte Calvario, whose five pinnacles resemble that of five fingers. The town was founded as a colony of the Greek city of Chalcis, in 640 BC, and suffered successive invasions. After a series of natural events the village was evacuated in mid 1960's due to the geological instability of the site. Today, it forms part of a network of trails for hiking, biking, trekking and serves as a tourist attraction due to its very decadence.<sup>xvii</sup> Apart from becoming film sets and a tourist attraction for ghost towns explorers, this growing number of settlements offer an, as yet, untapped potential to bridge the gap between decline and renewal, heritage and sustainability, localisation and resilience.

### **Scenarios of Revitalisation - Community-led Approaches**

Numerous EU strategy documents highlight the need for far-reaching social innovation if Europe is to ensure employment and prosperity within planetary constraints. The EU Sustainable Development Strategy calls for cost-effective, integrated and interdisciplinary policies to ensure that future economic development is coherently rooted in social cohesion policies and environmental protection.<sup>xviii</sup> The Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, inclusive economic growth also emphasises the crucial, overarching role of social, environmental and cultural dimensions of sustainability.<sup>xix</sup>

Recent research conducted in 13 EU countries by the European Association for Information on Local Development (AEIDL) found there were in excess of 2,000 local, community-led initiatives that were directly

engaged in practical activities to promote sustainable, resource-efficient, low carbon and climate-resilient settlements.<sup>xx</sup> The AEIDL survey identified permaculture, ecovillages and transition towns as key movements of community-led initiatives with international reach in Europe testing new ideas, technologies and approaches and demonstrating how citizens and communities can live more sustainably. Change is already happening, in the form of myriad of local initiatives across Europe. Would any of these approaches, promoting social-economic experimentation in fast-changing environments, support the revitalisation of abandoned towns in Southern Italy?

### ***Torri Superiore Ecovillage Case***

The origin of the medieval settlement Torri Superiore is uncertain, though it may date from the late 13th century, a time of great social and religious unrest in the region. This would explain the village's compact architecture remarkable for its width and height, which would have offered good protection to its residents.<sup>xxi</sup> The village is situated at the foothills of the Ligurian Alps, a few kilometers from both the Mediterranean Sea and the French/Italian border, close to the coastal town of Ventimiglia. Built completely in local stone and lime over the course of many centuries, Torri Superiore presents a unique urban layout with several five-story buildings, 162 rooms spread in an exceptionally intricate nature.<sup>xxii</sup> Narrow passageways, stairways, terraces and alleys create a complex labyrinth, a web of rooms and corridors interwoven and spread with surprising connections. The buildings at Torri Superiore were added to over the centuries, with the last parts of the hamlet probably being built around the end of the 18th century. It was at this point that population levels peaked before the village gradually become abandoned as people began to leave Liguria due to lack of employment.

In the late 80's a group of academics, professionals and enthusiasts initiated the process of negotiating the purchase of the abandoned village, and setting up a cultural association and sustainable community. Early into the project the decision was made to renew the building following ecological principles and materials wherever possible while respecting the original character.<sup>xxiii</sup> Torri Superiore was retrofitted over a period of 25 years in a comprehensive process of collective self-build utilising natural materials and appropriate technologies, compatibly with the limitations imposed by the local building codes and by the historical structure of the village.<sup>xxiv</sup> The settlement was given a new lease of life as an ecovillage, visitor attraction and a cultural centre with guest facilities and apartments for residents; a combined central solar, wood and gas heating system that functions at low temperature under the floor and on the walls; permaculture gardens and fruit orchards and organically farmed olive groves. With a solid social architecture built over time, a question remains whether community-led approaches such as Torri Superiore could support the rehabilitation of abandoned villages in Southern Italy creating a swift response to the increasing demand of housing amid record waves of refugees.

## Scenarios of Revitalisation: ‘Albergo Diffuso’ Model

Tourism has become a global economic sector with a wide and significant impact on the socio-economic and ecological development of regions and nations.<sup>xxv</sup> This global trend is apparent in Italy, where the tourism industry has become one of the main strategies for the recovery of abandoned settlements in the Southern region,<sup>xxvi</sup> with a direct impact on the identity and occupation of historic urban landscapes. In the early 1980s, the hospitality concept of *Albergo Diffuso* (AD) was introduced to revive historic Italian villages and town centres by revitalizing various historic buildings, thus attracting tourism to uncommon destinations. Translated as ‘*scattered hotel*’, AD offers guests the experience of living in historic sites in rooms scattered throughout different buildings within a village, overseen by a central management structure and hosted by a small community. Unlike a normal hotel, whose facilities are found in a single building, this model of hospitality consists of several units linked to each other within a range of not more than 200 meters. The concept was developed by the Italian scholar Giancarlo Dall’Ara, who defined AD as both an original model of hospitality and an approach toward sustainability.<sup>xxvii</sup> Scattered hotels, argues Dall’Ara, are healthy for the host villages, because they act as social, cultural and economic stimuli. He calls them ‘drivers of development’ because everything is sourced in the region, involving the residents and local producers, thus preventing depopulation.

According to Bulgarelli, this unique model of tourism development for historic sites does not produce negative environmental impacts, since it grows with the demand, as rooms are ‘regenerated’ and added to the existing network as necessary.<sup>xxviii</sup> Russo, on the other hand, argues that the principle of capitalising on ruins’ authenticity by transmuting ancient inhabited sites into ‘slow’ tourism places, mostly through foreign private investors, is questionable.<sup>xxix</sup>

To date, there are over 50 Italian ‘Alberghi Diffusi’ grouped under a National Association while 13 Italian regions have adopted legislation regulating the concept. The Albergo Diffuso model has been used in villages in the process of depopulation with good results, though it seems less effective in completely abandoned villages.<sup>xxx</sup> In first instance to establish an AD, a territorial analysis followed by a business plan should be developed. A SWOT analysis of two AD business plans demonstrates the absence or frequent change in regulations, bureaucracy, and long lead times to go through the process of authorisation, at both local and regional levels, as the main obstacles for establishing an AD.<sup>xxxi</sup>

### *Albergo Diffuso Borgo de Castelvete Case*

In 1996, Castelvete sul Calore, a small rural municipality of Irpinia hit by an earthquake in 1980, embarked in the project *The Villages of Tradition -*

*Recovery and Rehabilitation of Four Medieval Villages.* The project was part of a more complex strategy aimed at enhancing tourism in the whole mountain community of Irpinia, through a network of accommodation in traditional villages demonstrating valuable architectural and environmental profiles.<sup>xxxii</sup> Using the public-private partnership formula, the project ‘acquired’ abandoned buildings, which became public property, subsequently turning them in tourist accommodation, craft shops, museum and education spaces.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The AD was adopted as the strategy for rehabilitation of the historic centre and since 2004 the Albergo Diffuso Borgo di Castelvete (ADBC) has been promoting a regional approach to socio-economic regeneration. Its territory-linked catering services are connected with the food and drink producers who have increased their turnover due to the induced increase of demand.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In a close partnership with the local municipality and community, this AD is ‘de-seasonalising’ the local economy<sup>xxxv</sup> through the promotion of cultural activities spread throughout the year.

As for the applicability of the AD strategy in the ghost towns context, their state of complete social abandonment does not offer the possibility for initiating a regeneration process via the scattered hospitality model. The main challenge of introducing the AD as an approach for the revitalisation of abandoned villages is the need of reconciling the entrepreneurial project with the development strategies of the local territory while engaging the support of the neighboring communities of the deserted village.<sup>xxxvi</sup> A systemic way to address this challenge is by designing a multi-staged regeneration strategy as exemplified by the ghost town Apice Vecchia. Starting with the regeneration of its medieval Castle, it has now invited proposals for small businesses and B&Bs to return to the area, with a view of establishing an economic base and gradually attracting new residents who, in turn, could provide a platform for the establishment of an Albergo Diffuso.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

## Scenarios of Rehabilitation – Riace Humanitarian Approach

*‘While every refugee’s story is different and their anguish personal, they all share a common thread of uncommon courage: the courage not only to survive, but to persevere and rebuild their shattered lives.’ (Guterres, 2005)*

Each year thousands of men, women and children attempt a dangerous journey across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. Many of them are trying to escape poverty, climate impact and war in their home countries.<sup>xxxviii</sup> But the journey is very dangerous, and hundreds of people have died trying to reach Europe. The refugees heading for port cities are anxious to build their new lives. In the nineties Riace was turning into a ghost town before 200 Kurds fleeing the Turkish-Kurdish conflict landed on a beach near the small village in Calabria. The village was in danger of becoming extinct as waves of residents

migrated to Northern Italy for jobs. Taking refugees in allowed the village to preserve basic public services, such as the school, and also commerce that had almost disappeared.<sup>xxxix</sup> The population of Riace has since more than tripled to 2.800 residents, among whom are migrants of more than 20 nationalities. Today portions of the abandoned town have been rehabilitated, a quarter of the population is comprised of immigrants who have been given accommodation in the village's abandoned houses, as well as training to get them starting a new life. Riace is part of a national network of 376 municipalities called SPRAR, the Protection System for Refugees and Asylum Seekers, created by the Italian Ministry of Home Affairs and funded by the Italian Government and the European Union. Riace is a model of what SPRAR calls an 'accoglienza integrata' or 'integrated welcome'.

## Conclusion

'To change a major paradigm is to change our definition of what is possible.' (Woodhouse, 2005)

The number of ghost towns is increasing in Southern Italy.<sup>xl</sup> The progressive globalisation of our economies over the last century, orchestrated by "the pyramid of power that contemporary financial capitalism imposes upon the world"<sup>xli</sup> combined with the speed of urbanisation have uprooted the viability of thousands of small communities turning them in 'discarded elements of the modern consumer society'.<sup>xlii</sup>

Worldviews are formed to solve problems.<sup>xliii</sup> They change when existing solutions no longer work and rising problems require new approaches. This paper found out that ghost towns are the result of a convergence of multiple crises, incorporating human, natural and economic factors. Following Einstein's proposition that 'problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them', the paper went on to investigate emerging innovative approaches, which could address the abandonment as an opportunity to implement integrated rehabilitation strategies of multi-stakeholder response creating pathways for addressing the increased demand of migrant housing.

Ghost towns tell of a time not far away, still present in the collective memory,<sup>xliv</sup> where settlements were embedded in landscapes in a rich tapestry of cultural and natural values woven over time. Today they are the silent testimony of a time when culture and identity, geography and topography, diversity and exchange were eloquently expressed in a scale appropriate to the bioregion. Tomorrow they may become the living statements of a time when humanity re-ignited the locally adaptable, culturally rooted, energy conserving, technologically appropriate, inter-generationally balanced, place-based values and practices needed for historic rural settlements to thrive. Combined aspects of Torri Superiore, Borgo de Castelvete and Riace cases could provide a progressive framework through which the current trend of depopulation and abandonment of villages in Southern

Italy could be reverted. As a result of their imaginative approaches, these initiatives have made significantly progress towards the realisation of sustainable communities by strengthening social cohesion, addressing environmental vulnerabilities, rethinking tourism, fostering local economies, and improving housing status.

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