2.3 PER UN POSSIBILE RITORNO: ALCUNE ESPERIENZE

2.3 A RE-TURN IS POSSIBLE: CASE STUDIES

Nuovi paradigmi per possibili ritorni. Politiche europee e casi studio

Xavier Casanovas (Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya)

ONE NEEDS A TOWN

Studies and perspectives for abandoned or depopulated small towns

New Paradigms for Possible Returns. European Policies and Case Studies

Xavier Casanovas

In many of the preceding sessions we have had the opportunity to appreciate the value and the human and patrimonial quality present in the territory and in the minor centres throughout Europe, but we have also had occasion to be alarmed by the magnitude of the tragedy that is taking place in these areas from the beginning of the 20th century until today. We have seen in detail the great number and the state in which many of these places are, with a total abandonment and ruined the effort of many generations in the construction of their habitat and their traditions. Fortunately, all is not lost and we are now in a session from which only pure optimism can emerge, since it presents concrete experiences, implemented with more or less success, but real, which show us that the «return to countryside» is possible and not only the dream of some nostalgic. Undoubtedly not in all cases, but there are solutions, there are alternatives and with a good political, social and economic strategy, a turn can be made to the terrible and unsustainable situation that our rural territory is experiencing today.

World demographic data tells us that in November 2011, the 7,000 million inhabitants was born, in 1950 we were 2,530 million and in 2050 more than 9,000 million inhabitants are expected in the world. With these data, it seems a total contradiction that the internal areas of the continent with the longest history on the planet are rapidly deserting. The problem lies in the fact that all this population, in 2010 half was rural and the other half urban, in an unstoppable process of concentration

of inhabitants in cities. Let us take into account that by 1920 urban dwellers in developed countries only represented 30% of their total population, today they already represent 80% and in 2050 they will be 90%, with the consequent imbalance of the territorial and urban system. This growth of the urban population obeys three essential factors: the rural exodus that leaves the countryside for the benefit of the cities, the vegetative growth of the cities and international emigration. All this involves a fracture in the territorial and demographic balance, historically articulated in successive nodes of large, medium and small cities, towns, villages and dispersed habitat. Traditional architecture is an essential part of this structuring of the territory and of society, helping to consolidate the idea of community, which today is broken. We are not talking about monuments, but about identity, memory and "feeling of place", and all this is being lost.

Today, 80% of the European territory faces depopulation and this is one of the great current European political challenges. In the middle of the 20th century, the abandonment of rural Europe suffered an exponential growth that today manifests itself with the decline of the population and its aging without the possibility of replacement by the generational replacement, which inexorably leads to the abandonment and desertification of large areas of the territory of the European Union. The incessant migratory flow towards the cities and demographic change are strengthening the process of social fragmentation and polarization of our societies, with growing disparities in terms of economic capacity and accessibility to public services. This demographic imbalance in rural regions poses a threat to the socioeconomic system, in terms of both productivity and the provision of social services, in the preservation of heritage, as well as in urban-rural population imbalances, and in environmental and climatic emergency. This thorny demographic map should be at the forefront of European, national and local political concerns, but it is not always.

Since its founding, the European Union already seemed aware of the problem of depopulation of rural areas and established that special attention should be paid to regions suffering from severe and permanent natural or demographic disadvantages, such as sparsely populated areas. Regional aid to these areas is part of EU investments through the Structural and Investment Funds such as the Cohesion Fund, the European Regional Development Fund or the European Social Fund. More recently, with this objective, the European Parliament agreed "on the deployment of cohesion policy instruments by regions to address demographic change" or on the report that advocates promoting local development, to stabilize and correct negative local trends and demographic dynamics, while calling for EU policies to be coordinated to ensure rural development. There are many measures and agreements and few real results in the stabilization and correction of this scourge, that is destroying

the territorial balance and that will have severe consequences for Europe. In his case, Italy took the initiative in 2017 with the law *Measures to support and enhance small municipalities*, with the aim of countering the depopulation of small towns and encouraging their redevelopment and recovery. The Law intends to help small towns to improve the safety of the territory, reuse abandoned buildings, extend the broadband network, improve the infrastructure system, encourage soft mobility, implement services, and promote agricultural products and local crafts. Let us be attentive to the results that may be produced based on this law, to follow their example.

The diagnosis of the demographic challenge and rural depopulation has already been made and now is the time to take action with a strategic approach and with real proposals, since we are facing a serious problem that requires urgent action because time is running out. We must act with concrete solutions so that the territory and the towns are not left empty. Fortunately, in recent years, there have been numerous proposals and initiatives to stop this phenomenon and to preserve its heritage, identity, social, economic and environmental value. The orientation of these initiatives is very diverse and is conditioned by multiple global and local factors that undoubtedly require that in each case the situation and the possibilities of facing it has to be analysed in detail. It seems clear that, despite dealing with the same problem, the solution has to be adapted to its specific reality and the potential it presents, both internally and externally. The local, national and international legal framework as important references, but the interest and commitment of local authorities, as well as the local community, are essential to plan and advance any project. Facing the abandonment of the territory, of the towns and of the traditional architecture that shapes them is quite a challenge. We are not talking about buildings (that too), or people (that too) but about a whole territorial, social, cultural and demographic balance that must be rethought and recovered in order to achieve a sustainable society and face the climate emergency through a new social model and a new economy. It is evident that we cannot return to the situation of the mid-twentieth century, but rather that a new territorial paradigm must be built that will require resignations and find a respectful balance between the new urbanity and the humanized territory. Perhaps we should start thinking about the "landscape gardener" who maintains the territory, as we know it and cares for it for the enjoyment of the whole of society, for sure, with the resources contributed by all. It is not a local problem, but a global one, but one that requires strategic solutions at all levels, thinking more about the opportunities it offers us than as a problem.

We cannot lose sight of the largest global commitments in recent years in this regard as the UN SDGs 2030 (Sustainable Development Goals) and the New Urban Agenda for Habitat III. These

agreements propose a model for the development of sustainable human settlements from the social, environmental, economic and cultural aspects, recognizing the great wealth of humanity's cultural diversity and the great contribution they can offer to sustainable development. For this reason, SDGs 2030 and NUA propose prioritizing urban regeneration and rehabilitation avoiding social and economic segregation and gentrification, through integrated urban and territorial policies. Certainly, the NUA misnamed its name (instead of Urban should say Human), since its programmatic development proposes multiple measures to achieve rebalancing and territorial equity, and is not limited to cities but to the nodal configuration of the territory, as a framework in which Europe is articulated. All this should make it possible to outsource and compensate the urban ecological footprint, while giving the role that internal areas deserve. The NUA proposes to adopt sustainable, integrated, people-centred approaches to urban and territorial development through policy implementation, strategy formulation, capacity building and action at all levels. The aim is to strengthen fundamental drivers of change in urban and rural areas, to bridge social, economic and territorial gaps, encouraging interaction and connectivity between urban and rural areas by strengthening sustainable mobility and networks and infrastructure of technology and communications and promoting inter-municipal cooperation mechanisms and alliances between rural and urban areas.

Six very interesting experiences have been presented in this session:

Natalina Carrà, with the paper *Re-think Precacore. Projects and Processes for the Innovation and Valorisation of Small Abandoned Villages* presented the experience of the ancient village of Precacore within the Park of Aspromonte. In this case, it is proposed to take advantage of the Precacore site to use it as a strategic instrument in its own revaluation and as a central element of the park to reinforce its identity and cultural image, through the study and dissemination of its material and immaterial characteristics. This process will contribute to the definition of a model for the cultural, socioeconomic valorisation of urban heritage through the creation of networks and cultural circuits able to sum up to the reasons of interest of the individual areas considered separately as marginal roles. The ancient village will provide innovative services and functions that capture the attention of future visitors and useful for the promotion of local development.

Rossella de Cadilhac and Maria Antonietta Catella with the paper *The Medieval Village of Craco: Re-inventing with New Experiences of Anthropolization and Musealization* presented the case study of the medieval village of Craco in Lucania, abandoned as consequence of a slow but unstoppable landslide started in 1963. The ruin aspect of the settlement has become the distinguishing and attractive note for an ever-increasing number of visitors and, in 2013, the Scenographic Park of

the ruins was established in Craco, which determined the securing of part of its buildings along a well-defined itinerary. In order to elaborate a proposal for conservation and enhancement of the village, a cognitive process has been undertaken by the study of the village, from territorial to urban and construction scale. The results of the analysis permitted to formulate the guidelines for the intervention with two antithetical visions: considering the restoration of some building aimed at their reuse for artistic, cultural, scientific, and educational activities, and looking to a visiting itinerary with the consolidation of the ruins for scenographic purposes.

Imane Djebbour and Ratiba Wided Biara with the paper *Adaptive Reuse as Sustainable Strategy for the Revitalization of the City: The case of Monuments Reconverted to Museums in the City of Tlemcen* presented the results of the intervention on the built heritage for the event "Tlemcen capital of Islamic culture". In this case, some of the monuments in the city converge towards the museum function with an adaptive reuse of the old structures. These buildings are part of the community identity and now, through their new museum function, continue to be part of the memory and cultural identity of the local society.

Gaetano Manuele with the paper *A_R_T_ (A_rtistica R_ivitalizzazione T_erritoriale): A Strategy for the Revitalization of Small Centres* presented the Art as a tool to revitalize places and he presented some examples. Favara, in Sicily, where the project "Farm Cultural Park" permitted that some anonymous homes to be transformed into open-air works of art and highly appreciated as an important tourist destination. Satriano di Lucania, in Basilicata, where some artistic murals have been created with the aim of telling stories, illustrating local characters and narrating legends and superstitions. Bussana Vecchia, in Liguria, where several artists have recovered the architectural heritage, transforming it into a place of creativity and artistic experimentation. Nughedu Santa Vittoria or Motta Camastra where the promotion of a places has been done through temporary events which attract visitors, such as in the case where housewives open their homes to the tourists and cook local dishes for them. More examples were presented as nice ideas how the "Art" can be used to highlight traditional, social and cultural aspects of a place, also acting as a pull for the local economy and the small towns can also become places of inspiration and creativity.

Barbara Scala with the paper *The Role of Local Administration in the Regeneration of Historical Centres: the Case of Gardone Val Trompia (Brescia)* presented an abandonment process of the historical centre of the city which is still going on today. A process that determined a progressive impoverishment of social and economic system. In this case, the local authorities has been focusing their efforts on two main topics: the decay of buildings and the lack of shops in the area and the

main goal was to make this urban area attractive for residents again and stop the desertion of the inhabitants in order to preserve it alive and active. To do it, the choice of local administration has been to intervene in historical centre by a detailed analysis of the situation, both physical and social issues, and to look how to help the owners not by big projects instead by single interventions. All the studies identified many global problems that must be solved to be able to launch an urban regeneration strategy.

Tiziana Tarsia, Vincenso Schirripa and Sebastiano Citroni, with the paper *Refugees Welcoming and Enhancement of Villages: "Marginal" Self-representations and Cultural Strategies in Two Examples* presented two interesting case studies. Sant'Alessio d'Aspromonte, in Calabria, is the experimentation of the Sprar model of widespread reception for refugees and asylum seekers in a small village. Nosedo, not far from Milano, is a former agricultural village where the Associazione Nocetum has drawn in the monastic medieval past of the village to promote a variety of social and cultural initiatives that have welcomed fragile social groups, promoted local development and contrasted the state of abandon. Two heterogeneous strategies but in both cases they are the result of associative styles and organizational cultures with multiple levels of negotiation, in which local leaders and local community are engaged. Nice idea and great opportunity to engage immigrants and fragile social groups on the preservation of the deserted villages and territories.

We are in an academic field and Universities have made most of the presentations. This could be a problem and give us a skewed view of the situation and the problems. On the contrary, we must evaluate it very positively, since it shows us on the one hand the great ability of European universities to do applied research, to be present in the territory and to be socially involved in the problems of the country. In addition, the university gives us the essential multidisciplinary vision and the capacity for calm and objective reflection, without often-perverse constraints, to offer the necessary knowledge to know how to correct the territorial imbalances that are doing so badly in our society.