Journal of Rural and Community Development

The Rural Space Renaissance In Relation to Urban Space: Some Suggestions from Italy

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Abstract

This paper deals with the growing feeling of greater attention towards rural spaces with a focus on Italy. We discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed perspectives on inland areas, highlighting their environmental and safety advantages over cities. Examples of regenerative experiences in small Italian towns are shown through two case examples, such as the "1€ Houses" (or "Houses for 1 €", "H1€") project and a significative village regeneration initiative carried out by two private actors in the centre of Italy. The evolution of rural areas from agricultural spaces to tourist destinations is also explored, highlighting the potential for economic and social development. At the same time, idealized narratives of rural life are criticized, and the need for a more nuanced understanding of rural areas beyond aesthetics and tourism is highlighted. Overall, the article makes a call for the empowerment of rural communities, underlining the importance of building new social ties, economies and local communities that respect territorial diversity. In conclusion, some suggestions about policies to be implemented and the role of institutions towards local revitalization projects are provided.

Keywords: development, inland areas, depopulation, regeneration, community

La renaissance de l'espace rural en relation avec l'espace urbain : quelques suggestions d'Italie

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Résumé

Cet article traite du sentiment croissant d'une plus grande attention portée aux espaces ruraux en mettant l'accent sur l'Italie. Nous discutons de la manière dont la pandémie de COVID-19 a changé les perspectives à l'intérieur des terres, en soulignant les avantages environnementaux et de sécurité par rapport aux villes. Des exemples d'expériences régénératrices dans les petites villes italiennes sont présentés à travers deux exemples de cas, tels que le projet « Maisons à 1 € » et une initiative significative de régénération de village menée par deux acteurs privés dans le centre de l'Italie. L'évolution des zones rurales d'espaces agricoles à destinations touristiques est également explorée, soulignant le potentiel de développement économique et social. En même temps, les récits idéalisés de la vie rurale sont critiqués et la nécessité d'une compréhension plus nuancée des zones rurales au-delà de l'esthétique et du tourisme est soulignée. Dans l'ensemble, l'article lance un appel à l'autonomisation des communautés rurales, soulignant l'importance de construire de nouveaux liens sociaux, de nouvelles économies et de nouvelles communautés locales qui respectent la diversité territoriale. En conclusion, quelques suggestions sur les politiques à mettre en œuvre et le rôle des institutions dans les projets de revitalisation locale sont fournies.

Mots clés : développement, terres intérieures, dépeuplement, régénération, communauté

1.0 Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a different perspective has influenced the debate on the relationship between cities and inland areas. Inland areas, which have always been analyzed through the lens of their economic, social and cultural marginality, have been considered again as alternative options to living in the city due to their environmental advantages, air quality and safety (Boeri, 2021; de Luca et al., 2020). These areas have been framed as something more than simple leisure places for urban populations accustomed to low liveability levels and environmental homogenization (Eisenschitz, 2010). These trends have begun to overturn the well-established conception of inland areas as more authentic places, if compared to the urban context (Boschetto Doorly, 2021; Kivirist et al., 2004), often sitting at the centre of the public debate only within the context of emergencies (Guidoboni et al., 2011). This set in motion the reversal of the long-established perception of *bone and meat* Italy, which Manlio Rossi-Doria had already analysed during the fifties of 1900s[1] (Gorgoni, 2005). Those places are supposed to catch up to cities in terms of growth and development, overcoming the nostalgic conception of *frozen-in-time* places.

The conceptual path we aim to navigate, then, is one of deconstruction of the dichotomy between cities and inland areas, framing both as interdependent portions of territory that are experiencing together a global transformation. During the current historic stage, an apparent paradox about the future of the cities occurs: On one hand, someone talks about the crisis of urban centrality, but on the other, demographic projections still indicate the urban model as the dominant for the upcoming decades. In this context, there is still the need to re-think the definition of rurality (Black et al., 1995) and reconsider the entire relationship between centre and marginality, the inception of new communities and new living practices.

A great number of dynamic, creative, and regenerative processes has started to take place, avoiding both idealizing life in small territories and adhering to rhetorical narrations, which depict them only as pastoral places ready to be consumed by urban tourists. The communities involved in such initiatives are showing many instances of mutuality and supportive dynamics, all aimed toward building and re-building new citizenships.

During the last years, inland areas have increasingly been able to exert an autonomous attractive power, spurring the possibility of repopulation phenomena. Such phenomena show the openness and hospitality of new populations, which, despite the many labels used to depict them, are bonded together by the willingness to reanimate the daily life of their places out of their own volition. The idea of returning to inland places involves not only the new inhabitants, but also those who are already living in those places and are experiencing what Teti (2022) defines as *restanza*, meaning the "phenomenon of the present concerning the need, the desire, the willingness of generating a new sense for the places." Present-day society, with its more apparent emergencies, is prospecting new transformations of the relationship between human beings and the constructed environment, problematizing the difficult relation between development and sustainability.

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[1] According with this metaphor, Italy is supposed to be divided into "meat" places, that are the socially and economically advanced ones and "bone" areas, which are the poorest mountainous parts of the country.

The complexity of the bonds linking inland territories also carries the need of conceptualizing new types of communities and new living practices, characterized by a regenerative process involving both the inhabited place and the people who are staying or returning to it.

This paper is focused right on the analysis of some regenerative experiences of small centres located in the inland areas of the Italian territory, proposing a reflection on the development models of historically and environmentally significant areas, subject to desertification, ageing, low levels of social cohesion and a general socioeconomic and cultural decline (Barca, 2011, 2015). When tackling these critical problems, the question that permeates this work is aimed at analyzing the actions, the resources and the players potentially involved in attracting new inhabitants, as well as visitors and investment in these territories. Specifically, the paper wishes to offer practical examples of the regenerative processes of inland areas and, through some examples, the result of some of these interventions. We will describe some case examples of the experience of the H1€ project and the increase in involvement of citizens in the local governance and will conclude with a case of territorial regeneration policies on a national level born from the initiative of private entities.

These regeneration projects, while pursuing different goals with different means, are all taking advantage of territorial distance to build and imagine together a possible future—while also attempting to bring back the daily life and population of territories affected by deep changes and mutations.

The reference paradigm of the reflections of this paper is the attempt to re-assess the role of inland areas, their histories and cohabiting practices, highlighting their identity qualities that create space and possibilities for rebirthing actions and unprecedented perspectives. Inland areas can be the starting point for a post-Anthropocene where places are able to reinvent themselves, where the common good is front and centre, where the environment is considered as an equal, where remembrance is treasured, where conflict can be present but as a chance for transformation and resonance (Rosa, 2021) of the different territorial resources so that these territories can be reinhabited. In Italy, several communities, as the following case examples are going to show, have begun to consider new ways to take care of the environment and to implement new eco-compatible practices involving not only production but also habitability.

2.0 Comparing Different Rhetoric About Urban and Rural Transformation

Due to the increase in interactions and superimpositions between urban space and rural space, the political and academic discourse on global urbanization of the last decades limited the definition of inland/rural areas and other non-urban places to simple "operational landscapes" (Lu & Qian, 2023, p. 255) of the cities (Brenner & Schmid, 2015), without any social and cultural autonomous players.

Along with this debate, the last decade saw the consolidation of trends that give value to place-based skills, creativity and planning abilities based on the history, identity, and culture of rural places. Making way for this kind of thought allows us to avoid considering rural areas and inland territories as a cultural leftover where the ailments of urbanization have a chance to be cured and to divert our attention toward the texture, the identities, and the social and cultural practices of local communities (Gkartzios & Scott, 2015, Scott et al. 2017).

Neo-localism, thanks to the cultural identities of local players, can be seen as a strong form of social sedimentation that synchronizes the different local agendas concerning the production of goods and services, the attachment

toward the place and local identity along with local promotion and appreciation. The political, academic, and overall public debate of the last years has put *The Edges in the Middle* (Carrosio, 2019) and has led to a re-affirmation of the identity of these places, especially in those rural areas threatened by the loss of their cultural genuineness.

Some actors, however, are underlining the excessive overvaluation of the growth effects and the ambiguities stemming from the ways with which policies, communities and local cultures are supposed to reinvent themselves (Argent et al., 2013). However, as early as the 1990s, new post-Fordist and post-productivism transition trajectories began to emerge (Ciaffi et. al, 2020), whereby the rural began to be conceived not necessarily as an agricultural space for the production of goods for the market but also as a space for the production and consumption of recreational, tourist-experiential, cultural and residential services. Rural areas thus become more attractive, repositioning rurality within society as a whole. This change is caused by a multiplicity of socio-cultural processes, including, for the purposes of relevance here, the increasing mobility and integration of goods, services, people and knowledge between different territorial areas, including rural and urban areas (Hedberg & do Carmo, 2012). This transition has been integrated with the concept of multifunctional farming in order to give even further value to the heterogeneity and diversity of rural transformation.

Rural places have gradually set themselves free from the yoke of farming, shifting the creation of economic value toward other non-primary activities while reshaping rural space into leisure and vacation destinations for urban residents (Argent, 2019).

Rural areas often offer natural landscapes, cultural heritage and authentic traditions that can attract tourists seeking authentic experiences and contact with nature. They can also foster the development of circular economies and resilient communities that reduce waste, valorize local resources and promote solidarity and cooperation among inhabitants. This can lead to the creation of local production, distribution and consumption networks, the promotion of farmers' markets and short supply chains, and the valorisation of local craft traditions and trades.

Local cultures, initially, have been rediscovered under the guise of aesthetic consumption objects, outside of the sphere of urban modernity, often commodified and offered to financial flows, hoping that they will act as drivers for territorial development. The achievement of post-productivism and the development of multi-functional agriculture have surely been helpful in understanding rural transition. They widened the debate on the subsistence skills of rurality by using non-farming sectors that promote the cultural and symbolic capital of these territories, orientating the eye on the bonds and the mobility that links the urban and the rural element. Post-productivism can offer rural areas new opportunities for economic and social development, allowing them to exploit local resources in a sustainable way and to integrate into global economies increasingly based on knowledge and experience.

However, more recent studies (Barbera et al., 2022; Iovino et al., 2023) are prone to affirm that the rebirth of rural places has been too often attached to idealized narrations on poetic rurality and the quest for alternative lifestyles separated from the urban life. This approach stems from a sick *metrophilia* (Barbera et al., 2022) that is the widespread perception of cities as the vibrant, functional, and driving places to be, resulting in a policies' inclination to foster urban empowerment and expansion. According to this view, cities would represent the

country itself—or its best parts, at least—while the rural world emerges as a merely residual space, on the one hand, whose main value is offering occasional *authentic* life moments to the alienated urban citizens. Given this, the city-country relationship is necessarily resulting in a completely asymmetrical one, where the idealistic rural world represents just a mere "city backyard," a place to recover and skip to *real life*, i.e., the urban one.

The recent debate regarding the urban model led to a rediscovery of villages, "with its identity crisis, metrophilia has rediscovered *the small*, and takes refuge in the exaltation of the—allegedly—original urban nucleus, now considered the epitome and the paradigm of authenticity" (Barbera et al., 2022, p. IX).

In Italy, this situation caused the activation of several remarkable initiatives that paved the way for a phase where the rural and inland areas of the national territory have been rediscovered and reconsidered. Some examples can be found in the territorial accolades obtained by some national associations like "Borghi più belli d'Italia" [The most beautiful villages of Italy], or "Borghi autentici d'Italia" [Italian authentic villages]; in the approval of the National Strategy for Inland Areas—known as SNAI—the law on small municipalities n.158/2017[2].

The same authors that coined the term *metrophilia* (Barbera et al., 2022) to describe the Italian policies' attitude to pay more attention to the cities, counterpose it the term *borgomania* (Barbera et al., 2022). This term—i.e., village mania—refers to the peak of attention dedicated to small villages and rural areas as tourism destinations during the COVID-19 pandemic and to the consequent rhetoric which was contemporarily pointing them as alternative places to base a new model of urbanization. From the point of view of these authors, there has been an attempt to compensate for the lack of attention paid by institutions to rural areas with the empty rhetoric of villages as places ready to be colonized by the urban population. According to the borgomania trend, the internet connection and the related remote working possibilities, the healthy environment, and a generic perception of a better quality of life would have been sufficient assets for rural repopulation.

The pervasiveness of the centrality of inland areas in this kind of narrative is actually showing several critical points, mainly in terms of its relationship with urbanity and the negation of its autonomous and differentiated features. The study and analysis of these places should go beyond the themes of gentrification and idyllic rural life, leaving behind a narration where the city is always the observation point, whose dominion should be subject to critique and debate (Stockdale, 2016).

This paper presents an analysis of some case examples and aims to go beyond a purely aesthetic view of territories chained to a past that has been mostly subject to strictly branding activities, risking the commodification of space and the creation of competition whose only purpose is gaining clout and outside investors. The objective is to demonstrate the extent to which rural areas have the potential to establish themselves as inhabited and lived-in territories through actions that aim to "rebuild ordinariness" (Barbera et al., 2022, p. XV), and that can plan new relationships among people, nature and built environments, new social bonds, new economies, and local communities which respect territorial diversity. This has brought the creation, by the single communities, of experimentations of social and cultural innovation which have in turn led, in

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[2] Link to the record of this law at the website of the Official Journal of the Laws of the Italian Republic: https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2017/11/02/17G00171/sg.

addition to a restoration process of the buildings, to a peculiar relationship and opportunity network that tailored itself around every specific local context.

While the predominance of wishing for daily life in the rural and inland areas of the Italian territory is surely a far too recent trend, perhaps a sort of wishful thinking that makes it hard to see what's coming, one "should not discount that, in exceptional and unforeseeable situations, empty places might return to be inhabited places" (Teti, 2020, p. 91). The problems highlighted insofar are posing some rather complex socio-territorial issues, which should recognize and promote virtuous interconnections among the different territories.

The dichotomy between urban-rural/marginal areas should be abandoned (Mela, 2006). At the same time, local networks and territorial capital should be enhanced, weaving the threads of a new wholesome concept through experiences and experimentations that can combine the needs and the features of the communities. New frameworks of meaning around which one could build new territorial policies, also related to living, were rebuilt from the ground up by new community pacts and different kinds of territories. Due to the complexity of the subject, one cannot discount the influence that the pandemic has had when considering the possibility of a rethinking of the urban-rural/inland areas relationship.

Ever since the pandemic hit, the narrative of rural renaissance has been participated by a larger and larger number of different kinds of actors. The personalities involved in the rural world promotion range from specialized opinion leaders, such as famous architects and town planners, like the aforementioned Stefano Boeri (2021), to influencers very popular within the social universe, such as Chiara Ferragni (Ingrassia et al., 2022). The latter, in fact, have undertaken campaigns to promote various rural locations—either voluntarily or unconsciously—sharing images of their visits and generating positive impacts on the number of visits in the following periods. The Digital Storytelling (Hudak, 2019), which raised positive attention toward Italian rural areas, moreover, also increased thanks to home tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic, so it is possible to state that tourism also contributed to this collective narration (de Salvo & Pizzi, 2022).

During the first stages of the pandemic, we knew little about the virus, so the rural/inland areas were perceived as safe havens compared to how deeply the pandemic hit the cities (Florida et al., 2021). The areas with a low population density, isolated places and open territories were considered as ideal places where a citizen from the highly populated urban environments could take refuge to. Moreover, the confinement brought some very apparent changes in how the urban space was used, opening new ways to interact with it and even causing, in some extreme cases, people to leave it. Many newspaper articles claimed that during the first stages of the pandemic an urban exodus from large cities had occurred (Oliveres & Sanchez, 2021), which affected especially young people and families, who decided to move to rural municipalities (Nef, 2020; Galan, 2021). In the United Kingdom, Spain and France, for example, there have been reports of increased real estate purchases in rural areas (Marsh, 2020; Sagnard, 2021; González-Leonardo et al., 2022). In the United States, moreover, there has been an increase of emails forwarded from the cities to non-metropolitan areas, which might mean that there has been an increase of people moving from large cities (Whitaker, 2021).

Starting from the large number of rural tourists recorded during the pandemic situation, Italy has also been particularly affected by a strong re-evaluation of inland areas as places to settle in. The architect Stefano Boeri, in one of the main

Italian newspapers (Boeri, 2020), said "step away from cities, the future lies in the villages", a position that strengthened the perception of micro-urban proximity not only as leisure places but also as places for settling in. During the pandemic, the stance of esteemed Italian architects like Stefano Boeri and Massimiliano Fuksas has started to form a conception of villages as places to inhabit, a choice that—and this point was often underlined—could prove crucial in saving land consumption, in giving value to circular economy models, in reutilization and function-changing of spaces. This is a new vision that caused the concept of the second home to wane and started to valorise the idea of settling in a place for daily life and for working.

3.0 Returning to Inland Territories and Breathing New Life into the Communities

The forthcoming years are bound to be influenced by an exponential expansion of urban phenomena. According to the United Nations (UN, 2018; 2022), by 2050, around 70% of the global population will live in a city, but at the same time, the urban model will undergo several structural problems.

We have highlighted how the urban model—however much it has been challenged (Barbera et al., 2022)—is at the centre of political attention and also responds to the aspirations of many citizens who continue to migrate to cities to take advantage of the opportunities and lifestyle they offer. While the urban lifestyle is attractive in many respects, traumatic events such as the COVID-19 pandemic have also highlighted its limitations. On the one hand, this has ignited a certain focus on the rural world while exposing it to the risks of possible eco-gentrification. Which role could peripheral territories play, and what value and significance can we attribute to those increasingly depopulated areas surrounding the cities, and how can they be promoted?

Around 60% of the Italian territories consist of small centres that are far away from essential services like healthcare, education and collective transportation, with remarkable environmental resources and a social and cultural context that was once solid and cohesive but that is deeply undermined by the depopulation and abandonment phenomenon (Teti, 2017; De Rossi, 2018). These territories are affected by a cognitive bias, according to which they lack modernity but are rich in culture and environment care, in contrast to the city, which represents the manifestation of business, bureaucratic, and political power.

Present-day society is starting to debate and critique this bipartition, attempting to restore the proper distance between cities and inland areas and trying to fight back territorial differences, improving the quality of life and service access (Osti & Jachia, 2020). In the academic and political debate—in Italy and in other areas—the rhetoric about these territories has started to be overturned, and inland areas are gaining an appreciation that is leading them towards achieving respect based on their different roles.

In Italy, in particular, the National Strategy for Inland Areas (SNAI) had the merit of putting marginal areas and small municipalities at the heart of public debate. Their stories have been promoted by using and especially regenerating their ancient histories, memories, traditions, and behaviours, all placed at the centre of the identities of these territories, and communities are playing a major role.

Disregarding the importance of the inland areas, in fact, was the main driver of their marginalization. The dominant classes of the last decades have been slowly abandoning inland areas, favouring policies aimed at supporting cultures, projects, subjects and places carrying an innovative and dynamic aura. A reductive development approach that "occults complementarity and

interconnections, that overlooks the fact that the excessive anthropologic weight of the centre and the complementary excessive lightness of the margins imply territorial rifts and widespread grudges in the losing, unimportant areas" (Cersosimo & Licursi, 2022, p. 193). SNAI represents the most ambitious attempt at reverting the social and cultural impoverishment of the most distant territories and at breathing new life into the planning of services and development models that can halt their decline.

The SNAI consists of a set of actions that address the state's actions and attention toward the inland areas, with the willingness to promote local communities using a place-based approach (Barca, 2011). SNAI is widely considered an enlightened planning that has been overlooked in favour of the recent National Village Plan (Piano Nazionale Borghi). The National Village Plan is being employed to answer the repopulation challenge, which was issued in December 2021. It is characterized by a pronounced centrality of local solutions, implementing the logic of large-scale projects that do not solve the problem of territorial differences at all, following the line of thought of high-end ventures which do not mitigate the differences but rather accentuate the creation of rifts and dissonances within the communities.

The element that should arise is the community and territorial dimension of development that opens itself up to experimentations where participation, ecological transition, circularity are blended with culture, quality of life and repopulation in a more virtuous system that triggers a true and proper revamping of civil life, setting up meetings and debates that can shed new light on memories and identities which can start up virtuous cycles of cohesion among citizens and anybody else that resides or transits through a territory.

A new idea of inland areas takes form, then, where even the promotion can play a different role, leading to new symbolic values and daily life methods, which are bound to dry up and run out with the sole use of promoting practices. These new paths are evidently interlinked with local communities, projected toward new cultural, social, and economic dynamics, and are also trying to deconstrue a narrative that is always exceedingly positive and not always truthful of these places (always depicted as wholesome, safe, clean, uncontaminated, etc.), favouring new stabilities and restoring the cohesion of the communities.

4.0 How Inland Areas Created Chances for Original and Innovative Regenerations in the Relationships Among People, Nature, and Environment - Two Case Examples

This paragraph analyses territorial redevelopment and re-urbanization initiatives focused on inland areas in order to observe the limits, potentials and outcomes that affect the places and communities they focus on. The goal is to detect the effects of these processes to discuss new models of widespread urbanization. With the presentation of some case examples, we will try to give answers to questions raised in a delicate historical moment from an economic and social point of view, in which the use of space by man through the urbanization model is growing but also strongly discussed. In fact, in the last fifty years, the enormous impact that economic growth has had on the environment and society has been noted, prompting various experts to propose a redevelopment of the urban model. In particular we present some practical application cases of inland areas' regeneration processes. Through some examples, we aim to show the different outcomes of these interventions. So, we will analyze and discuss both some cases of territorial regeneration policies that start at the local level at the behest of a private individual and some Italian cases of municipality-based

enterprises that contribute to regenerating some rural territories by renewing real estate properties and attracting new inhabitants.

4.1 The H1€ Project: The Commodification of the Rural for Urban Consumers?[3]

The Italian case of the H1€ project represents a territorial regeneration project that has been able to initiate redevelopment processes in marginalized and neglected territorial contexts by the national government. The project also has the merit of having raised the level of attention towards this type of territories, changing their perception, in many cases, and increasing the debate concerning them. This project, although characterized by various limits and many doubts about its long-term effects (Bindi, 2021; Cersosimo et al., 2022; Rizzo, 2022), can represent a formula of cooperation between public and private with varied positive effects for the places where it is activated (Ferreri, 2021; 2022). It seems that the project was born on the initiative of Giuseppe Ferrarello, mayor of the small town of Gangi, Sicily, in the province of Palermo (Boschetto Doorly, 2021) in 2009, even if there is still debate about its actual starting. Despite obtaining a certain success in terms of requests for information from the external public, the project became famous when, shortly after, it was also activated by the Municipality of Salemi, Sicily, in the province of Trapani. In this case, the initiative benefits from the notoriety of its promoter, the mayor of the city, Vittorio Sgarbi, a well-known art critic and prominent political and television personality in the Italian media landscape. The H1€ project consists of the transfer of unused houses located within small villages in rural, marginalized and peripheral areas for the symbolic figure of 1€. The project, now implemented in about 60 municipalities throughout the Italian territory, has been applied following different methods, regulations and governance processes. It is characterized from municipality to municipality, and it also has some nuances in terms of the purpose of the project. It, in fact, in some cases has been carried out entirely on the initiative of the municipality and has remained under its control during its entire duration, in others, instead, it has provided for its entrustment to startups created specifically or to existing real estate agencies, as in the case of Troina (Delon & Graziano, 2023). Especially in the most recent cases, H1€ has received a generally positive reception from the local population, while in others it started among not a few resistances and convinced oppositions, which also reached the form of verbal attacks personally directed at the figure of the mayor who promoted the project, as happened in Fabbriche di Vergemoli, Tuscany.

As mentioned, the H1€ project also differs from case to case for the purposes for which it is implemented. While some municipalities try to attract new residents, capital and entrepreneurship to revitalize their social and demographic fabric, others limit their ambitions to the sole architectural redevelopment of their centres. Despite some differences between one scenario and another, we can say that the general intention is to enhance the settlements involved, regenerating them in the broadest possible sense: economic, urban, architectural, and social. Although the project has already produced tangible positive results, at least in terms of the purchase of houses put up for sale for 1€, not a few of the municipalities involved have decided to interrupt it for various reasons. As reported by Valentina Boschetto Doorly (2021), municipalities such as Gangi

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[3] This case example has been analyzed by the combination of a desk analysis, which lead to the composition of the state of the art and inspired the questions for nine in-depth interviews with local administrators of the municipalities mentioned in this paragraph.

and Mussomeli succeeded by selling 120 and 180 houses, respectively. At the same time, other municipalities, such as Patrica in Lazio, have interrupted the project due to its poor success, which was determined mainly by bureaucratic difficulties. The evaluation of the results of this project, however, cannot be limited to the mere count of the houses sold. As Delon and Graziano (2023) point out, it is too early to assess the long-term impact of this project, even for the municipalities that have activated it for the longest time. In many cases the municipal administrations of these small municipalities are not reactive in providing data on the restorations actually completed by the buyers and, moreover, often data are not collected on their actual permanence within the village and on the use, they make of the buildings after they have restored them. It is not yet known, therefore, how many of the "1€-buyers" become stable inhabitants rather than long-term tourists, local entrepreneurs, real estate speculators, etc. It therefore seems that the project has produced an effective regeneration of the territory, in some cases, even if there are still some key information missing to be able to express a convincing global evaluation. Despite this missing information, it is already possible to detect the positive effects of the project lay moreover on the governance, cultural, and social field, rather than the architectural and real estate ones. Among these positive effects, the main one concerns the place communication. Together with the attention that some media had already dedicated to the small centres of rural Italy, such as the reality TV show "My Big Italian Adventure" with Lorraine Bracco, the H1€ project has brought on them. For each of the municipalities that have joined this initiative, in fact, thousands of requests for information on the possibility of buying houses for 1 € from all over the world have arrived. This is what the mayors interviewed by Valentina Boschetto Doorly (2021) reported, as well as those of Cantiano, Fabbriche di Vergemoli, Penne and Pratola Peligna, whom we met together with their collaborators during a cycle of interviews conducted in 2022. The contacts via mail range from just under 1000 to more than 5000 within 72 hours of the publication of the notices within internationally known virtual spaces. The most famous of these is certainly www.casea1euro.it and its English version www.1eurohouses.com. This web portal exceeds the figure of 1,300,000 unique visitors in 2020 following the publication of an article by BBC News that interviews its owner, Maurizio Berti, as well as the only observer of the Houses for 1 € phenomenon in its entirety, as Maurizio Berti himself reported during our interview on April 22, 2022. The H1€ project, therefore, has shown to offer almost disintermediated global visibility to the municipalities that have activated it, putting them at the centre of unprecedented attention. At the same time, however, the same phenomenon has put these small public administrations under pressure, and they did not have the means to manage. All the mayors and administrators we interviewed, in fact, claimed not to have enough staff and linguistic skills to process all these emails with due care. Even though this represented a limit, local administrations seem motivated by all this attention. From our interviews, in fact, it emerged that many of them, convinced of the communicative effectiveness of the project, have continued the work of mapping abandoned buildings and have increased efforts to contact the various owners of unused houses to make them available to the municipality for sale.

As a final reflection, it could be said that the H1€ project has a certain heuristic capacity. Its activation, in fact, led to the identification of some crucial problems regarding the territorial regeneration of internal areas.

First of all, it has brought to light a problem concerning the management of widespread abandoned real estate, namely that of tracing the owners and the possibility of freeing these properties to allow their free sale. Often, the households of these buildings do not even know they own them; they are many

and—not infrequently—at odds with each other on the idea of selling; they are often abroad, difficult to trace, and not inclined to respond; in many cases, it is even difficult to know who they are, because over time the documents certifying ownership of the house have not been correctly updated between one generation and another.

Secondly, the project has stimulated local administrations to launch initiatives that can have a tangible impact on their territories and require the involvement of citizens.

Finally, the H1€ project is orienting the general perception towards these places. As many authors maintain, this is one of the most important aspects in initiating territorial revitalization processes (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005), especially in rural contexts (Dinis, 2004), even if, let us remember, territorial regeneration cannot be reduced to a mere communicative performance.

4.2 The Redevelopment of the Medieval Village of Postignano in the Umbria Region[4]

This case study is about the redevelopment of the medieval village of Postignano, a part of the Umbrian municipality of Sellano. It classifies as "peripheral" under the SNAI policy, meaning that it is a village in an internal area belonging to a marginal zone.

This village, founded in the 13th century, reached its maximum expansion in the 16th century, with a population of 400 inhabitants. Its demographic trend remained stable, with alternating phases until the 20th century, when it experienced the dynamics of progressive depopulation that were affecting many hill villages of the Apennines until it reached total desertification in the late 1060s due to concerns about high seismic danger. After this phase, the village remained deserted until 1992. In that year, the acquisition of the entire village began with a real estate company which purchased one property at a time from the heirs of prior owners.

The business idea was to give new life to the settlement through its complete renovation and resell it after finishing the work. However, the company still owns a large part of the village, half of which is a scattered hotel, and the other half is intended for sale. The owner company, in fact, needed to change its business goals deeply after facing an earthquake that stopped the restoring process for ten years (from 1997 to 2007), letting the project continue in a completely mutated socioeconomic scenario.

The maturation of postmodernity and the global economic crisis strongly affected the real estate sector. All these events meant that the village could no longer be sold entirely to another subject because the real estate values plunged, and a lot of new work was required to finish the project. The village owners, nonetheless, did not give up on the initiative, deciding to turn their goals into a long-term strategy. This choice implies that new work dimensions had to be handled like the social one. How can a new population for a deserted settlement be created in an isolated mountainous scenario, for instance? How do we create connections with the surrounding settlements? How can we preserve the history, the memory, and the identity of this place with no long-standing population inside (Pizzi et al., 2022)?

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[4] This case example has been written basing on 15 in-depth interviews with new village owners, their staff, local administrators, and new inhabitants of Postignano.

We can consider this project as an interesting case example characterized by an innovative approach. This project, in fact, rejects a prosaic romantic vision of rural areas, attempting to revitalize the village concretely. Even if this project presents many limits and some controversies, the attempt to do so appears genuine for many reasons. Firstly, we can say that the history and culture of the place have been saved thanks to this company's intervention. Before its investments, the village and its relevant historic finds were lying forgotten and getting ruined by the passing of time. The valuable architecture of the Middle Ages has been restored according to its original appearance and materials, giving back to the local community this important example of "spontaneous architecture." This process, furthermore, has met the most modern anti-seismic criteria, making the village and the nearby road—that is a crucial connection also for the near settlements—safer than ever.

However, the innovative character of this initiative is mostly expressed by the attention provided to the social spaces and activities. Squares, libraries, a theatre, and gardens have been one of the project priorities; shops and other commercial activities have been implanted, like a bar, a restaurant, a spa, and a hotel. In the meantime, while some of the new flats were being sold to new residents, new relations with surrounding local inhabitants were attempted. Some of them, indeed, found not only a job in Postignano but also a new cultural life (concerts, art galleries, and other social events).

Another element of innovation, in addition to these, has been the new internet connection. The hamlet is now connected to a wired internet connection for the first time in its history. This effort, along with the anti-seismic measures adopted, represent a new wave of attention towards this marginalized area, which has also gained a certain interest from the local media. As mentioned before, this project also presents many relevant limits that must be considered within this analysis. Based on the interviews with the village owners, its new inhabitants, and the surrounding population, we can say that there are some issues that still need to be overcome. The cost of the renovated flats and the remoteness of this village make this place able to attract only a few categories of potential dwellers.

Nowadays, in fact, those who purchased a flat in Postignano are mostly wealthy foreign people. This creates a harsher environment for establishing socio-cultural connections with the surrounding towns. The cultural events schedule appears to be one of the limits the village neighbours face. The events that take place in Postignano, in fact, are perceived as too sophisticated. The jobs offered in the village, in addition, are not constantly occupied and are characterized by an intense turnover. Young locals usually do not work there for more than a season because they seize the opportunity to leave depressed area as soon as they can.

Another relevant problem is that the entire Postignano restoration initiative has never been supported by the regional government, which underlines the isolation of this project and its leaders. Despite these weaknesses, we still believe that this project represents an interesting and innovative endeavor. It is the first time that a private actor—even with economic interests, of course—has invested such a large amount of money (many millions) in an extremely remote inner area, taking into account various social aspects. Today, the village of Postignano seems to gradually increase its social and economic integration with its surroundings, continuing to struggle with the limits we just mentioned.

5.0 Conclusion

Italy is a polycentric country (Associazione Mecenate 90, 2020) that has the chance to experience the quality of its different territories with a fruitful, relationship-rich exchange. The Sars-Cov-2 pandemic changed the direction of how inland areas have been perceived, i.e., marginalized through the decades, unproductive, recalcitrant toward innovations, and reduced to operational places for urbanization. A relationship that stripped away the autonomy of these territories but that has been brought back to the centre of the debate by the very crisis of the urban model. Gillen et al. (2022) claim how, at a global level, the identity of rural life has started to be incessantly re-invented and how inland areas are creating scenarios, experimenting with more practices, narratives, and strategies in the view of an upcoming development.

The outbreak of the Sars-Cov-2 pandemic has also laid bare the fragility of urban systems, which have not always been able to cope with the sudden changes that have occurred over the past two years. This has given rise to unprecedented development perspectives that seek to overcome the romanticized and idealized perspective of these areas, freeing them from a subaltern vision and initiating other types of rhetoric.

In this regard, in fact, the case examples show how these areas are experimenting with socio-economic development models that are a tangible answer to depopulation and the lack of essential services. The documented experiences illustrate a perception of small settlements as sites of interest deserving of development initiatives, global attention, and investment. This type of vision enhances these places and can originate from non-locals—as in the case of Postignano—and from the implementation of external but scalable models—as in the case of the H1€ model. In this way, the possibility of hybridizing actors and policies can convert the perception of rural places to that of being isolated and closed. Conversely, these experiences demonstrate that organizational structures open to the international dimensions, new investments, new practices, and new rhetoric are feasible.

At the same time, however, these territorial regeneration processes would need a more favourable institutional environment (Battaglini, 2024)[5]. As several authors have pointed out, in fact, local institutions constitute one of the main building blocks for the emergence of effective social and economic innovation processes (Dinis, 2004; Labrianidis, 2006). The promoters of these initiatives complained in the interviews about a lack of collaboration from local, but above all, regional and, in some cases, national institutions. Moreover, these institutional levels simply acted in response to stimuli from local actors without ever taking the initiative. In some cases, they also played a role in hindering regeneration processes. Obviously, institutions are not expected to uncritically favour all proposed projects but to be proactive in stimulating them and to make their own democratic means and principles of operation available to improve and support them where possible.

In this light, it would be appropriate to consider not only a vague change of attitude by institutions towards projects like this but also more specific functional interventions. A law on the expropriation and transfer of real estate in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas of the country, for example, could be a solution to facilitate urban projects in rural areas. Furthermore, the

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[5] To deepen the role of institutions in local innovation processes, see also
https://www.oecd.org/regional/leed/social -innovation.htm

creation and financing of offices and administrative networks dedicated to large rural areas to support or even design similar initiatives would be useful. If such structures worked in concert with city institutions, housing plans could be conceived not only limited to urban areas but wider areas.

The final result of these projects can be a testament to the buzz permeating rural territories, contradicting the rhetoric of abandonment and determinism. The pandemic has increased the awareness, in the century of the metropolis, of how important it is to offer a new role to play to inland areas, even if the frailty of these territories is a particularly critical fragility of contemporary society that could aggravate the social and economic disparities.

Inland areas, nevertheless, are positioning themselves as resources for planning shared political actions, breaking out of a dichotomic vision between urban and inland areas and looking instead for more integration. The sustainability of the development of inland areas is evidently linked to the cooperation between territories and people, reinventing in an innovative way even the relation among nature, built environment and community, also regarding the promotion of new inhabiting ways.

The challenge is about giving value to polycentrism, restoring the differences and the territorial fragilities of inland areas so that they can return to be lived-in places with active communities. In order to ease this process, however, it is necessary to adopt an earnest point of view, without biases, but that can still be critical toward every possible regenerative experience, a point of view that can uphold the preset models instead of arguing against them, or that can add to the already recognized best practices some additional experiences that have never been considered before due to unmotivated prejudices. This is why further research should deepen the study of the H1€ project. The pilot interviews with the municipalities we led in 2022, in fact, have shed some light on interesting thinking points about the limits and the possibilities of repopulation initiatives such as these, especially on the communication and management-administrative point of view, showing that this project could go beyond the mere aspect of territorial marketing.

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