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**Repopulating abandoned villages.
New housing strategies for the pandemic**

Abstract
Social distancing has brought the issue of repopulating abandoned villages and inland areas to the forefront. Italian experiences speak of the situations of communities, policies and projects which for years have been seeking an answer to the issue of empty inland areas and the country's two thousand semi-abandoned villages. The pandemic has accentuated the problem of lost places and shone a spotlight on these settlements, which could actually become a partial response to Covid-19. Today we must ask ourselves whether living in villages or small towns could be a model for a way of life that offers protection, or whether it is an experimental retreat, an act of bucolic revenge by those who have always been against cities and their lifestyle.

Today science demands that we practise social distancing, which essentially means the cancellation of human relations, living in a condition of physical isolation and limiting movement from place to place. Such restrictions cannot fail to have an effect on our living spaces and the places we share, on our towns and our cities.

Even though – in Italy at least – with the loosening of these restriction we appear to forget the difficulties we have recently suffered, the issues that have emerged in the sphere of lifestyle as a way of combating the pandemic find no answers in science.

Among the countless hypotheses around finding a cure and preventing the coronavirus from spreading and hence a new way of living, the issue of abandoned villages appears to have taken hold not only among experts in the field, architects and town planners, but also among sociologists, anthropologists, economists and ordinary people: «Like the earthquake, the coronavirus is an accelerator, in the sense that it brings to the surface critical situations which already existed» (Properzi 2020). A recent article by a well-known paesologo reflects on the idea of repopulating the villages and landscapes, «regenerating a strategy for inland areas, because the pandemic has objectively opened up a space for major public intervention. Looking after small villages […] is not a gift but a service given to Italy» (Arminio 2020). The question we must ask ourselves concerns living in villages or small towns, in other words whether this could be a model for a way of life that offers protection, or merely an experimental retreat, even an act of bucolic revenge by those who have always been against cities and their lifestyle. Leading voices in architecture suggest that large cities should adopt villages as genuine outposts for the flight from the city; a shal-

Fig. 1
Colletta di Castelbianco (Savona), the dryers.

low response which triggered an intense debate and led to the retraction of results of numerous studies on the true state of policy in the SNAI (National Strategy for Inland Areas) or associations such as UNCEM (National Union of Mountain Communities) and ANCSA. The system of abandoned villages is backed by experiments with solid results for «community welfare micro-projects» (Carrosio 2020), which could provide a starting point for the evaluation of an effective and concrete reappropriation of such places. In such cases, it is not so much a matter of repopulation but of staying

«Staying has nothing to do with conservation, but requires the ability to relate past and present, to redeem lost but inhabitable streets which modern life has missed, bringing them back to life and the present. What was seen yesterday as backwardness may no longer be so. Unproductive and abandoned mountain areas today offer new resources and new opportunities for life» (Teti 2020).

Today the debate seems to centre on the epidemiological aspects, but in the issue of village living appears to many people as banal and little-understood:

«Beyond the widespread wishful thinking that runs through this kind of intervention – which rarely considers questions of resources, policies, tools [...] – or the cities which 'help' inland areas, as if they were empty shells lacking community, plans and desires, and their only assets were nature and history» (De Rossi 2020).

It is inevitable that the size of settlement, the concentration of society, the space for interaction and relations between towns generally give rise to more questions than answers:

«Is it really housing density itself that is a problem, or could it be the density of physical relations (considered as the amount of close physical contact between people) and the ways in which this is experienced? If the problem were physical-relational density, there would be no need to encourage residential dispersion, which would not necessarily reduce physical-relational density» (Chiodelli 2020).

It is no accident that there are villages like Orticoli, Attigliano and Sillano di Garfagnana, which have had no cases of Covid-19; small, isolated villages, self-sufficient communities which managed to achieve social di-

Fig. 1
Colletta di Castelbianco (Savona), the rampant stairs of the housing units.

stancing not on an individual level, but as communities. The dichotomy of isolation/protection versus isolation/abandonment is ethically and scientifically dubious: on the one hand the word isolation can easily be understood as protection, but it can also have a facet of abandonment. The debate therefore centres on a renewed interest in human settlements which have always constituted a way of living in their own space – i.e. villages, small towns and inland areas – «as a new frontier» (Tantillo 2020).

We are at a momentous point in time, in which philosophies based on the recuperation of inland areas may ride the wave of the country's interest. «We'll have no recipes, no best practices, no established routes to follow. In the small villages we'll only have three things: creativity, the agility that characterises small projects, and the desire to do it» (Dall'Ara 2020) and we can also claim that «the mountains themselves are [...] the main reservoirs for sustainable development, the so-called *green economy*» (Tarpino 2019).

Isolation evidently means protection; and new technologies allow us to stay at home and work remotely; indeed, to isolate ourselves from others. But this model of living certainly cannot wholly and instantly replace the current system in terms of industry, trade and relationships. In fact, if we look at Italian experiences of living in solitude, the existential gap becomes quite clear. One of the first redevelopments of abandoned villages, Colletta di Castelbianco near Albenga represents both the best and the worst of possible outcomes. Colletta di Castelbianco is a medieval village whose origins can be traced back to the early Middle Ages, with buildings from the 13th and 14th century in the village centre. Development during the 15th century can be seen along the access roads and the main street; buildings from this period tend to have just two storeys, or three in exceptional cases. After the 1887 earthquake, the population of the village began to fall, a gradual decline which concluded with definitive abandonment in the 20th century. One of the few remaining fortified villages in Ligura, Colletta constitutes a hugely valuable open-air textbook on urban planning and architecture. The intervention in Colletta in the early 1980s allowed architect Giancarlo De Carlo to repair a rift with the past by recovering the urban environment with the addition of low-impact building techniques. The aim of the project was to restore the village and make it inhabitable

once more. De Carlo was many years ahead of his time with his idea of living in extreme isolation. The question to be asked here is one that De Carlo always asked himself: who are these new residents the village aims to attract?

«It all comes from an idea of business [...] so the work was done to bring cable to the village and also fibre optics, focusing on the idea of remote working. And it worked, although in the end the foreigners fell more in love with the stones and the history of the place than the technological possibilities» (Ricotta 2016).

The idea of living in a remote place in close contact with nature and a slow pace of life, a place of balance between urban space and human space. Once again De Carlo was farsighted: today, 30 years later, there are countless individuals and families seeking to find a simple, comfortable life for long periods of holiday time, not necessarily linked to the seasons, but able to meet today's criteria for health and safety. The current way of living, not only in legislative terns but also spatially, led De Carlo to design larger rooms and different connections between them. The installation of utilities was done with the least possible impact, including under-floor and wall heating. In the case of Colletta the project was an almost philological reconstruction of the entire village; Giancarlo De Carlo succeeded in interpreting the topographical accretion, typological aspects, lexical nuances and the architectural vocabulary of the lesser elements. The result is the work of a single planner, and based on a well-defined standard; even today there is an appointed "architect" in the village, who is entrusted with any further intervention. In effect this role, initially played by De Carlo, is currently occupied by Ole Wig, who provides general guidance on the aesthetic impact of any work carried out in the village and checks the suitability of necessary interventions. All interventions bear a clear, unambiguous signature, i.e. the search for an architectural language whose purpose is stylistic restoration; the reborn village is a reconstruction that leaves no room for new additions, and the result is a snapshot of an idealised time, when the village was at the height of its splendour. Ultimately it could still be called a dead village, precisely because interactions between humans and space are controlled, and therefore could be called the sought-after result of an anthropological outcome. Initially, the entire village was intended as a model for modern living far from the city, but over time this system of living in solitude, even in a highly globalised era, gave way to the usual multi-property hotel complex. Colletto is simultaneously a positive and a negative example which may convey a provisional and non-exhaustive conclusion. Today we are experiencing new and unexpected collective reflection; shaken by exceptional events, today's society is asking questions about the issue of everyday space, but also about collective space, and whether it really corresponds to a model which meets our needs. The repopulation of abandoned villages and sparsely-populated areas cannot be a conclusive response to health issues. If anything, during this crisis we need to grasp additional values in life that we had perhaps lost at the individual level. In our collective rediscovery of the meaning of community, it is possible and desirable that the village model is seen as a life choice for social and financial reasons, but certainly not a replacement for the city. The example discussed above shows that specialisation on a single function for its own sake cannot be an adequate motive to declare completely positive results. A striking example is Civita di Bagnoregio,

«a medieval village that has miraculously escaped the passing of time [...] in a momentous phase during which the village underwent a radical transformation [...] with beautification and spectacularisation of the village [...] for the use and consumption of the tourist industry» (Attili 2018).

The inhabitants of Colletta themselves are very far from living a rounded social and family life; the presence of adult family groups, the lack of children, the sporadic nature of residence all point to the fact that repopulating a village is very different from living in it. Today Colletta di Castelbianco seeks in every possible way to maintain social tension (by rediscovering and replanting olives and chestnuts), but it is not a complete village in terms of services, development and underlying local economy. Italy's villages can be a partial response to the emergency and change and, as in the densely-populated city, the most important thing is to

«learn to live with uncertainty and change: change and crisis are part of the evolutionary process of complex systems; one of the key ways of maintaining and increasing resilience is actually to live with the phenomena that change» (Colucci 2015).

A provisional conclusion cannot fail to highlight the only partial successes of this kind of «realised utopia» (Anele 2020); abandoned villages and small towns really can be a valid alternative to cities and a clear response to the current emergency, but we should not fall into the linguistic and urbanistic trap between living in solitude and living in isolation, to avoid confusing a village with an industrial building converted into an isolation facility.

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