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RE-EVALUATING THE DISTANCE: VIRUS AS A "GREAT URBAN PLANNER" IN THE REDISCOVERY OF INNER AREAS AT RISK OF DEPOPULATION

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has triggered a broad critical reflection on the improvement of human life with respect to the themes of living and the relationship with nature and the environment, marking a return to those inner areas from which in the last century we had moved away because they were considered isolated, cut off from the urban logic of connections, of proximity (Fig. 1).

Now that distance appears necessary, perhaps our parameters and desires have also changed. The lockdown has awakened us dormant desires of nature, of culinary tradition, of a different relationship with the neighborhood; in short, it has changed our horizon.

Here the virus, "great urban planner" - paraphrasing the book of Marguerite Yourcenar "the time great sculptor" -, acts as an accelerator of transformations in attributing a new centrality to those smaller towns up to that moment considered at risk of abandonment, bringing out that cultural and historical-landscape richness that has always existed but prefiguring new or rediscovered models of reuse of the territory in favor of a possible demographic recovery that is more residential than receptive and that passes for a new model of life. Smart working and digital teaching open up to new perspectives by reducing the disadvantages due to the distance from essential services and prefiguring a new dimension of living that can influence individual choices in the direction of building a new way of living.

Designing a new time of work reconciling it with a different cycle of life is what we could therefore try to do to fulfill a long-lost request for a relationship with nature. The question is complex and not without problems, but the regeneration of inner areas at risk of depopulation passes from this opportunity which must not be lost.

Keywords: covid-19, inner areas, proximity, new inhabitants

Resettlement strategies for inner areas

The virus acts as an accelerator of a change in gaze which has already been underway for some time. Long before the pandemic, these urban realities considered "small" not for architectural quality but for functioning, had found their centrality in the architectural debate, attracting the interest expressed through various actions.

First of all through a capillary action of narration of the internal territories. Franco Arminio, a poet



Fig. 1. Photo credits: Francesca Bruni.

from Irpinia land, creating the figure of the Paesologist underlining the value of testimonies of lifestyles, crafts, ways of building now lost and. This is a new "form of attention" towards settlements, which are recognized as having an important role in guarding the Italian territory, custodians of memory and beauty, and whose depopulation entails a freezing and deterioration of places, an emptying of relationships and an environmental and cultural desertification. Through his poetry and encounters with the population, he highlights the great value of these realities built in harmonious relationship with the landscape through the voice of those who still live there and do not want to leave them. Underlining the attraction potential of these internal areas "endowed with resources that the central areas lack and from which all of us need goods: water, good air, food, landscape and culture" [1], is the SNAI National Strategy of Internal Areas through which the Italian Government since 2012 has rekindled attention to these realities by defining 71 areas and strategies consistent with the potential and needs of the territories. The methodological revolution of this action is the method of co-planning and dialogue with the communities and the possibility of encouraging the encounter with the three levels of land management: government, region and municipalities. Numerous regional experiments have been carried out throughout the peninsula, workshops and projects, aimed at direct action to support sustainable territorial competitiveness, with the aim of creating new income opportunities and ensuring the inhabitants accessibility to essential services (local public transport, education and social and health services) as well as to improve the maintenance of the territory itself. But the real problem that emerged is the lack of human capital.

In this sense, there have been numerous initiatives and proposals to repopulate these territories. Through new forms of inclusion/ghettoisation for entire abandoned centers that are repopulated by non-EU citizens, redeveloped through projects that focus on new forms of tourism from the reception in a widespread hotel, homes sold for 1 euro, community/innovation hub, innovative and sustainable agriculture experiments proposed by local communities, smart villages for which the digital transformation of the areas is central, experiments of contamination of use that resort art as an attraction tool based on the model of Favara Farm cultural park in Sicily (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Farm cultural park, Favara (2010).

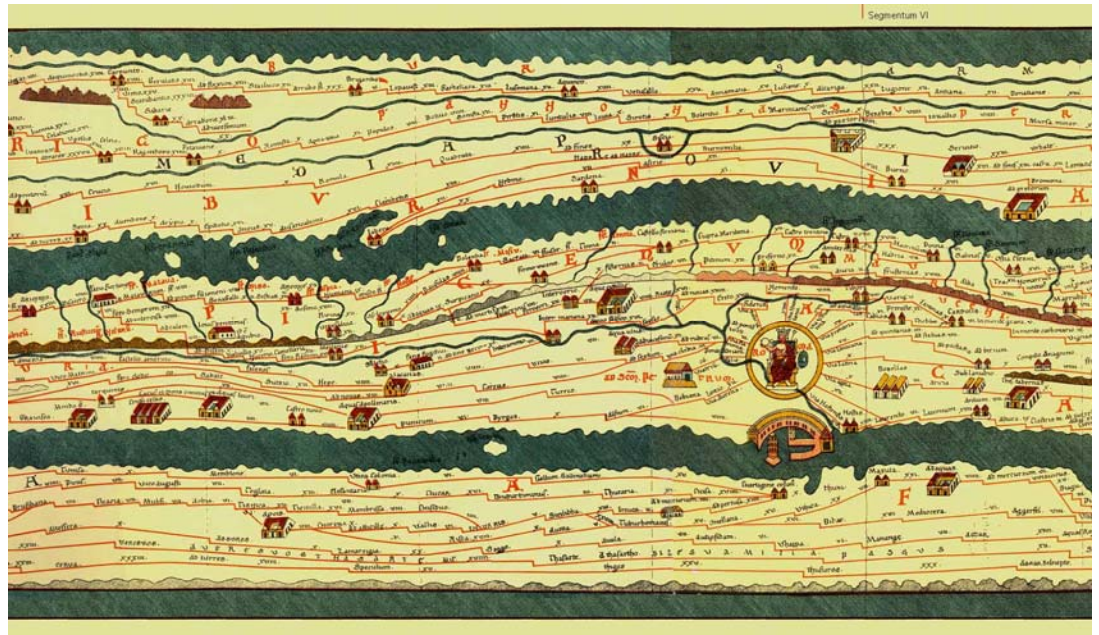


Fig. 3. Peutinger Map (XII-XIII century).



Fig. 4. Italian Pavillon at 2018 Venice Biennale.

But any hypothesis, however innovative, cannot fail to understand the common characteristics of these inner areas whose richness lies in diversity but whose potential is all in its geographical specificity of belonging to a single network model that is profoundly different from the rest of the world territory, which branches off from one of the oldest infrastructural systems in the world that runs through Italy and is based on a network of consular roads built by the Romans (Fig. 3). An infrastructural system that must therefore be strengthened in order to relate these centers that could function as constellations of a multicentric territory rethought in terms of sharing services between neighboring centers. All this to start from a central idea: that these must not be places of consumption (of nature, traditions, etc.), but above all territories of production: of new cultures, social innovations, knowledge and technological practices, of

renewed ways of doing welfare and interacting with the environment.

The potential of this model was identified by Mario Cucinella in 2018 in the "Arcipelago Italia, Inner Areas" pavilion of the Venice Biennale (Fig. 4), which chooses to represent the identity of our country through the numerous and widespread design initiatives carried out in recent years to the inner areas, thus proposing on Italian urban model as an "archipelago" of internal areas characterized by another space, neither city nor suburb, which is that of the "proximity" of many cities that make up a network [2].

In the same direction goes Stefano Boeri, who has long been a proponent of the construction of a new green economy, speaks of "constellations" of villages, small active centralities safeguarding a territory. The model envisaged is that of a different distribution of the network and sharing of services for citizens and a collaboration

between metropolitan areas and villages on the French model. A "reciprocity contract" with the nearest cities that will have to act in collaboration, and not in competition, with a view to a virtuous exchange, "for which those who plan to move their lives to a place other than the city, have the guarantee of to be within a circular economy circuit on agriculture, forestry, craftsmanship and intellectual work linked to the big city" [3].

Concluding remarks

Now the appearance of the virus leads to an overturning of values, needs and desires, it brings out a new meaning of time, no longer seen as a productive factor, which recovers its human quality linked to use. It triggers an acceleration towards an idea of change that has been under discussion for some time. The environmental issue, already in the limelight for some time, now becomes central in the necessary renegotiation of urban space suddenly and quickly appropriated by nature. Inner areas do not have an environmental issue, they have none.

I believe that only a new way of living and inhabit can really change the destiny of these territories. A real regeneration can only take place by enhancing the connection in terms of accessibility and mobility, as well as overcoming the digital divide, increasing services or sharing them with neighboring centers. A location choice linked to the abundance of space and rarefaction of relationships could attract a social mix that can involve professionals in search of environmental quality, couples looking for lower real estate values, young people with entrepreneurial ambitions and more sustainable lifestyles. These choices, if linked to a permanence of individuals, even if they do not reach large numbers, could produce significant structural effects with respect to the desertification risk that inner areas run. Of course, this is not a naive vision but a great

project to reform the villages that requires a very broad vision, which is accompanied by numerous infrastructural problems: the central one of the absence of services, that of the digitization of rural areas due to delays in the BUL ultra-broadband digital connection plan, the issue of mobility is one of the big questions for these territories so it is important to understand how to reach these places also through new low-speed modes.

The now cyclical confinement of the lockdown, and it is from within the second lockdown that I am writing, shows us how we must reorganize ourselves also considering other landscapes, those of nature. It makes us understand that perhaps living can no longer be minimal, that it is necessary to have more mediation spaces between the inside and the outside, it shows us how it is possible to live without a city and the importance of a balcony open to the landscape, of a life perhaps possible even in those internal areas from which we had all distanced ourselves (Fig. 5).

Certainly the virus has the merit of having brought out a new concept of community that must be refounded and a new proxemics that must be experimented, in this sense the attractive power of these inner realities also seems to open to new populations, not comparable to seasonal tourism, but who have ties with places or in search of community ties or other, "mountaineers by choice", new inhabitants, producers and innovators, a possible response of the virus to the problem of depopulation.

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Fig. 5. Bisaccia, Irpinia inner areas.