

sous la direction de  
LAMIA HADDA  
SAVERIO MECCA  
GIOVANNI PANCANI  
MASSIMO CARTA  
FABIO FRATINI  
STEFANO GALASSI  
DANIELA PITTALUGA

## Villages et quartiers à risque d'abandon

*Stratégies pour la connaissance,  
la valorisation et la restauration*

TOME 2

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**Cultures pour la  
conservation et la  
valorisation du  
patrimoine à risque  
d'abandon en Italie**



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# REVITALIZATION STRATEGIES BETWEEN CULTURE AND SOCIAL MARGINALISATION. THE CASE OF THE HISTORIC CENTRE OF COSENZA

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 View of a street within the historical centre (photo by N. Sulfaro, 2019).

**Annuziata Maria Oteri**  
Politecnico di Milano-Italia

**Nino Sulfaro**  
Università Mediterranea di Reggio Calabria-Italia

The historic centre of Cosenza, in Calabria, has undergone a process of almost incessant depopulation since the Second World War. According to several scholars, that process has been fostered above all by the choices of municipal administrations which, through liberal urban policies and deregulation, have oriented urban development towards areas outside the historic centre. This generated a rift between the city and its centre, which over the years has been emptied of its functions - political, economic, cultural, and symbolic - and has undergone a process of abandonment and social marginalization.

The present proposal intends to analyse the processes and initiatives described, trying to demonstrate how the revitalization strategies of a historic centre cannot be entrusted only to cultural policies intended to enhance the use of architectural heritage or cultural animation, but must go through a bottom-up approach through actions of social awareness, education and enhancement of resilience of the communities also towards possible economic and social shocks, as the recent Covid-19 pandemic has shown.

**Keywords:** Historical Centre, Cosenza, Revitalization, Social marginalisation, Culture

## Introduction

Culture as a means of economic and social cohesion is one of the themes proposed by the EU cohesion policy for 2021-2027<sup>1</sup>. That is a particularly challenging issue for Italy, where culture and cultural heritage constitute the main national asset and where policies based on culture could simultaneously trigger economic development and be a factor of cohesion and inclusion and, therefore, of social sustainability. Culture-based strategies in marginal areas, which are increasingly being consolidated in the theory and practice of planning development policies in Italy, have shown enormous potential. They have also underlined some critical factors and open challenges, mainly related to the ability to increase levels of access, actual use of heritage and the degree of community cultural participation.

Despite a vast, extensive, heritage endowment - over 200,000 listed architectural, archaeological, and museum assets, 68 assets per 100 square km -, with a remarkable result in terms of cultural significance and socio-economic values (54 sites and 6 oral cultural heritages and

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<sup>1</sup> EU 2020 – European Commission, SIMPLIFICATION HANDBOOK 80 Simplification measures in cohesion policy 2021-2027, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, Bruxelles 2020, accessible at [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/2021\\_2027](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/2021_2027) (last access 14/09/2020).



**Fig. 1**  
View of Cosenza  
from the top of  
the old town  
(photo by N.  
Sulfaro, 2019).

intangibles recognized by UNESCO), cultural enjoyment in Italy remains underpowered. This is particularly the case regarding the widespread heritage, above all in the South, where large sections of the population remain excluded from the circuits of cultural fruition and where even internal tourist demand is struggling to establish itself. Levels of participation in cultural activities by Italians are modest, especially compared to European numbers: in 2016 only 28.3% of adults aged 25 and over expressed a strong cultural participation, while 38.8% of adults were totally inactive<sup>2</sup>.

The present proposal, through a case study – the historic centre of Cosenza - intends to analyse the processes and initiatives described, trying to demonstrate how revitalization strategies of a historic centre cannot be entrusted only to cultural policies intended to enhance the use of architectural heritage or cultural animation, but must go through a bottom-up approach through actions aimed at enhancing social cohesion.

### **Weak policies for resilient communities**

In recent years, increasing attention amongst politicians and the public has been addressed to peripheral or marginal areas<sup>3</sup>. Globalization and the ongoing phenomenon of depopulation are under the spotlight of international policies that focus on the negative effects of the two issues. At the same time, more recent interest has also been emerged for the positive reactions of marginal areas to current challenges, thanks to good governance,

<sup>2</sup> Direzione Rivista Siti Unesco, *La cultura come strumento di coesione sociale ed economica*, in *Siti. Quotidiano di attualità e politica culturale*, 22 giugno 2019, accessible at <https://www.rivistasiti.it/la-cultura-come-strumento-di-coesione-sociale-ed-economica> (last access 14/09/2020).

<sup>3</sup> The term marginal (or peripheral) is here referred not only to physical marginality but also to the social one. Furthermore, the idea of marginal areas mainly refers to small towns or villages, both in rural or mountain areas, which, according to the National Strategy for Inner Areas, cannot easily benefit from health, education, and accessibility. As in the case of Cosenza, the term also includes historical city centres that had become marginal over time in relation to the new city around.

the participation of the community in everyday life, growing attention to social and environmental aspects, well-being, and the changing world of work<sup>4</sup>.

In Italy, the supposed supremacy of big towns, intended as models for innovation, creativity, and attractiveness, which has been narrated in the last few decades, has not obtained the expected results in economic growth. On the contrary, social inequality and the discrepancy between North and South and between metropolitan and marginal areas have increased<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, the current impact of the Covid 19 pandemic seems to suggest that rather than being considered a problem, one can look at peripheral areas as resources. This common belief had already been brought into the discussion before the pandemic, and in the last twenty years the conviction that small towns are the best habitat for human life has arisen from many quarters (scholars, local communities, experts in ecology, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and so on). Politics had been blind to this perspective until 2014, when a National Strategies for Inner Areas (SNAI) was laid out from a collaboration between the National Agency for territorial cohesion and the European Commission.

Compared to the weakness of metropolitan areas, during the pandemic the peripheral and depopulated small towns revealed remarkable levels of resilience and self-organization capacities to face the difficulties of quarantine. However, not all researchers - architects, urban planners, sociologists, and economists - agree on a possible “revenge” of the inner areas against the failure of the “Big Towns model”. Even if dramatic, the emergency has been too short to change rooted politics and behaviours, and it is now clear that strategies and policies adopted until now have been revealed as inefficacious. It is a fact that small towns in inner areas still present the same problems that have caused continuous and persistent migration towards big towns since the last century<sup>6</sup>.

Nevertheless, what happened in Italy during the lockdown seems to reinforce new interest for marginal areas and the idea of gathering and transforming the many examples of good practices activated by the resilient communities into something more similar to urban policies. This issue is strictly connected to another one, that is the necessity to overcome the dependency on urban areas, and urban-centric cultural policy<sup>7</sup>. Communities in non-urban

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<sup>4</sup> Cotte A., Fund F. (eds), *Culture Crops. Cultural Practices in Non Urban Territories*, Beyond the Obvious 2019 edition, Report of the Conference, Culture Action Europe, Brussels (2019), accessible at [https://cultureactioneurope.org/files/2019/12/BtO\\_2019\\_Report.pdf](https://cultureactioneurope.org/files/2019/12/BtO_2019_Report.pdf) (last access 05/09/2020).

<sup>5</sup> Cersosimo D., Donzelli C., *Manifesto per riabitare l'Italia*, Donzelli, Roma 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Oteri, A.M., *Aree interne e città. Né vincitori, né vinti nella lotta contro il Covid 19*, 22 aprile 2020, in I territori fragili e l'epidemia, <https://www.eccellenza.dastu.polimi.it/2020/04/22/aree-interne-e-citta-ne-vincitori-ne-vinti-nella-lotta-contro-il-covid-19/> (last access 5/09/2020)

<sup>7</sup> Voices of Culture, *The Role of Culture in Non-Urban Areas of the European Union*, Brainstorming meeting (Alfeld, 4th-5th February 2019), Final report, April 2019, p. 14, accessible at <https://voicesofculture.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/VoC-Brainstorming-Report-Role-of-Culture-in-Non-Urban-Areas-of-the-E.U.pdf> (last access 28/08/2020).

areas rarely reflect that, in many cases, wellness, but also the wealth of cities may depend on non-urban areas. For example, if mountains collapse or glaciers shrink, the effects inevitably impinge on city centres. We can also reasonably affirm that this mutual interdependence is physical and socio-cultural; if the totality of knowledge and tradition of peripheral and rural areas collapses, it inevitably involves the related city centre.

A.M.O.

### **The role of culture in hindering social marginalisation**

From many parts, the idea of enhancing the potentiality rather than the weaknesses of marginal areas has been emerging. The starting point is to consider marginal areas as places of opportunities rather than unlucky, troubling sites. For example, this was the attitude of the participants to the 2019 structural dialogues Voices of Culture, between the European Commission and the cultural sector. The dialogue was dedicated to *The Role of Culture in Non-Urban Areas of the European Union*. The participants agreed that culture and creativity are part of life in such locations. Many other national and international policies, and initiatives promoted all over in Europe to re-launch marginal areas, insist on the prevalent role of culture, in which we obviously include cultural heritage. Focusing on Italy, the above mentioned SNAI includes preserving and enhancing cultural heritage among the main actions for the economic growth of inner areas at risk of depopulation. Of course, placing culture at the base of the re-launch of marginal areas involves some risks. For example, retrieving memory and traditions is very often interpreted as the mass consumption of this same heritage. It is mostly characterized by small rural and inner historical centres in which landscape and architecture are fused together in very suggestive contexts. Financially, it contributes to local economies primarily for its value of use in touristic accommodation capacity.

The other risk deals with the lack of identity in these areas. Stereotypes and false storytelling (the original Tuscan medieval village, the authentic Irish pub) are often the *leitmotiv* of the initiatives for re-launching marginal small towns. They are based on the idea that authenticity and tradition, usually sold to visitors, are static concepts strictly related to the past. The result of such an approach is doubly artificial: for visitors, who consume unreal sites, and for local communities who live like strangers in their habitat (when they are not expelled from the area due to gentrification processes) without any economic benefits.

In recent time, new approaches have been studied by researchers who start from different viewpoints: an evolving and challenging idea of identity; the involvement of local communities in strategies for the re-launch of these areas; the inclusion of cultural strategies

in the wider economic and social policies for that specific territory; the idea of heritage, both material and immaterial, as a common, shared resource, both by inhabitants and tourists. Some interesting experiences in Italy, based on the above-mentioned points, have been at the core of creating a network of sparse communities using culture. In Valtrompia, for example, one of the main valleys in the province of Brescia, the Attivaree Valli Resilienti (Activate Resilient Valleys) initiatives, launched by the local Mountain Community, have involved the small local communities of the Trompia and Sabbia valleys in a process of rediscovering their identity. Among the main purposes of the projects we can quote the involvement of the sparse population in a process of rediscovering their identity, particularly through involvement of the inhabitants in the processes of maintenance and restoration of historical rural architecture<sup>8</sup>. The idea is to bring these communities at risk of extinction closer to their important heritage of art and architecture. In this way, cultural heritage is seen as a cultural, but also as an economic resource; a common good to invest in rather than to abandon. The project starts from the idea that local communities care for their culture and traditions but they are often unable to imagine or propose the best strategies to hinder depopulation and activate new economies. Skill development for locals could be a good opportunity to involve them in protecting and developing their cultural heritage.

In this perspective, the Cariplo Foundation in collaboration with the Polytechnic of Milan created the Valtellina cultural district (a mountainous area of Lombardy strongly characterized by terraced vineyards realized by terracing the rocky mountain slopes using drystone walls). The landscape and the economy of the region depend heavily on the preservation of these traditional construction techniques. Thus, the investment of Fondazione Cariplo was addressed to the empowerment of the local system and improvement of local skills in the care and maintenance of drystone walls. The effects are circular; local communities are personally involved in the preservation, care, and maintenance of the most valuable characteristics of their territory, appreciating them and, at the same time, the preservation of this fascinating system of terraces and of culture improves the economy connected to wine production, and cultural tourism.

A.M.O.

### **The historic centre of Cosenza: cultural heritage and marginalisation**

The examples described in the previous paragraph all have the involvement of local communities in the strategies and processes of revitalization in common, trying to integrate the

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<sup>8</sup> See; Scala B., Boniotti C., *Il patrimonio architettonico montano rurale della Valle Trompia. Linee guida alla conservazione e alla conservazione*, Nardini, Firenze 2020.

protection of heritage, culture, and social cohesion. In this perspective, events in the historic centre of Cosenza, in Calabria, show how culture-based strategies without the involvement of disadvantaged communities can be unsuccessful in relaunching historic centres, especially in marginal areas of the south of the country.

The historic centre of Cosenza, or “Cosenza Vecchia” (Old Cosenza), is located on the eastern side of a hill called “Colle Pancrazio” and is bordered to the east and west by two rivers, Busento and Crati<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 1). It has undergone a process of almost incessant depopulation since the Second World War. According to several scholars, that process has been mainly fostered by the choices of municipal administrations, which, through liberal urban policies and deregulation, have oriented urban development towards areas outside the historic centre. This generated a rift between the city and its old town which has been emptied of its functions - political, economic, cultural, symbolic - and has undergone a process of abandonment and social marginalization.

The old town remained within these territorial boundaries for many centuries: until the Nineteenth century, it had expanded with only three small villages - Porta Piana, upstream of the historic core, Rivolcati, along the left bank of the Busento, and Pignatari, at the foot of Colle Triglio - increasing the population density with buildings developed in height, mainly due to the flooding of the two rivers, and malaria<sup>10</sup>.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, demographic growth due to the urbanization of the population coming from the surrounding small towns and earthquakes - in particular, in 1905 - constituted a strong push in favour of the expansion of the city beyond the two rivers. Specifically, expansion continued during the fascist regime, when major public housing initiatives were implemented.

From the second post-war period onwards, the absence of urban planning tools that could guide urban transformations generated uncontrolled urban development. Since the immediate post-war period, the core idea of the administrations has been to leave maximum freedom of action to individuals in the development of the city, reaffirming the principles of economic liberalism and the limitation of public intervention.

Between 1950 and 1970, the most significant demographic and building growth of Cosenza took place, which led to a fracture in urban development, when the push for

<sup>9</sup> See; Rubino, G. E., Teti, M.A. (eds), *Le città nella storia d'Italia. Cosenza*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 1997; Bacca-ri, R., *Lo sviluppo urbanistico della città di Cosenza tra la fine del XIX e i primi del XX secolo*, in Carella, L. (ed), *Villa Rendano tra musica seta e arte*, Fondazione Attilio e Elena Giuliani, Pellegrini, Cosenza 2013, pp. 91-120.

<sup>10</sup> See among the others: Cersosimo, D., *Cosenza*, in *il Mulino* n. 6/17; Francini, M. et al., *La rigenerazione urbana dei tessuti periferici a valenza storica. Declinazioni, possibili scenari e strategie*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2018; Barresi, S., Campolongo, A., Giannattasio, G. (eds.), *Cosenza. Dimensione urbana di una città meridionale*, Edizioni 10/17, Salerno 1990.



city expansion externally to the historic centre, generated an overturning of the relationship between the old town and the rest of the urban territory<sup>11</sup>. A new urban identity with strong class divisions in the neighbourhoods also impacted the historic centre, where the flight of high and middle classes to the new city was accompanied by the parallel settlement of immigrant families in old buildings. The contradictory choices of the administrations in this period, therefore, were decisive for the historic centre: on the one hand, they satisfied the demand for housing for the working classes, on the other hand, they created the basis of decadence, in an urban and social sense, of the historic centre that has been progressively emptied of the resident population, of productive activities, and marginalized by the planning of new services and urban life which now take place outside the historic centre.

From the 1990s to today, central and peripheral administration policies have promoted a series of initiatives aimed to reacquire historical and architectural values of the town, the symbolic functions of the historic centre, trying to catalyse economic interests around an idea of revitalization based on culture.

Nonetheless, the social and cultural rift with the rest of the city and the progressive decay and marginalization of the historic centre still persist (Fig. 2).

Yet, according to a traditional taxonomy of culture and creativity in the urban context<sup>12</sup>, the historic centre of Cosenza presents many elements that would make it a highly suitable location for cultural production: valuable historical architectural heritage - churches, the castle, collegiate, noble palaces -, various archaeological traces, numerous libraries, a theatre, study centres and cultural institutions, art galleries and many national, municipal and private museums. The traditional places of culture seem to have failed to become elements of urban and social regeneration.

N.S.

### **Culture-based strategies: some reasons for failure**

Decades of isolated interventions in the historic centre of Cosenza have not interrupted its progressive material and social degradation. They have shown the absence of integrated policies explicitly aimed at combating poverty, and at social inclusion in correlation with the restoration of buildings and the redevelopment of urban spaces.

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<sup>11</sup> During the 80s, while Cosenza tends to lose its attractiveness, effectively contracting the population, people and families move to the municipalities of the urban hinterland, where since 1972, the University of Calabria's settlement has become a strong element economic boost.

<sup>12</sup> Hristova, D., Aiello, L.M., Quercia, D., *The New Urban Success: How Culture Pays*, ArXiv abs/1804.03760 (2018): n. 27, accessible at <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1804.03760.pdf> (last access 14/09/2020).



**Fig. 3**  
View of one  
of the most  
degraded  
neighbourhoods  
in the historical  
centre of Cosenza  
(photo by N.  
Sulfaro, 2019).



Among the several reasons for the failure, public interventions rarely concerning the restoration and renovation of private buildings stand out, which naturally constitute the most significant part of the historic centre. While the public heritage has been largely restored and reused - the headquarters of the Province, Palazzo Arnone, which has become the National Gallery, the transformation of a historical building into the National Library, just to mention some main examples -, one of the principal emergencies of the historic centre remains the degradation of private buildings and the living conditions of the inhabitants<sup>13</sup>. The social and cultural unease within the historic centre has been exacerbated by a strong presence of foreigners, mostly migrants and Rom, coming from the eviction of a nearby nomad camp, in 2015. They have occupied abandoned buildings, generating conflict with the few remaining original residents. The new inhabitants obviously have little knowledge of the culture and history of the old town, perceiving only the negative representation linked to social tensions, abandonment and the absence of services.

<sup>13</sup>The Piano Operativo "Cultura e Turismo" (FSC) 2014-2020 (Delibera CIPE n. 10/2018) Contratto istituzionale di sviluppo (CIS) "Cosenza - Centro storico", which assign 90 millions of Euros for the relaunch of the historical centre of Cosenza through culture-based strategies, still in definition phase, also excludes interventions on private buildings.

In this perspective, despite the presence of numerous cultural testimonies, the current administration is struggling to re-define the identity of the city through the use of myth, trying to link its past to the Visigoth king Alaric who, according to legend, after having sacked Rome in 410 AD, found his death near Cosenza and was buried together with part of the rich booty at the confluence of the Crati and Busento rivers.

We have to say that, during the 1990s, the municipal administrations carried out redevelopment programs promoting various initiatives by focusing on the reacquisition of identity based on the cultural heritage of the city, on the recovery of the values and functions of the historic centre and also trying to catalyse economic interests around this idea of urban regeneration. However, even in that phase, the adopted strategies did not succeed in having a full impact. Cosenza was admitted to the “Piano Urban” program which constituted the main financial tool of the implementation of the redevelopment of the historic centre by the administration, with a view to intervene with an integrated approach, providing both restoration and new services aimed at reducing risk of poverty and social exclusion. However, concentrating the funding of the “Piano Urban” program only on the historic centre was considered too risky, so the administration preferred to support “light” actions aimed at recreating some level of repair of the urban fabric between the historic centre, the new city and the suburbs and at supporting cultural initiatives, favouring the transfer of university and commercial activities to the old town. Towards the end of the 1990s, a so-called “Contratto di quartiere” (neighbourhood contract) in Santa Lucia, one of the poorest areas of the old town, was initiated. For the first time, public intervention was deliberately aimed at supporting inhabitants and revitalizing the social fabric of the historic centre. The contract was blocked and, in the following period, with it also the process of rebirth of that part of the historic centre (Fig. 3). The lack of success of the described interventions; demonstrates how the revitalization strategies of historic centres cannot be entrusted only to cultural policies intended as adaptive reuse of architectural heritage and enhancement of the cultural entertainment and leisure offer, but should go through a social requalification “from below” through actions aimed at raising awareness, education and enhancement of resilience against possible economic and social shocks, as the Covid-19 pandemic has shown.

In this perspective, cohesion policy can contribute to supporting processes of integrated enhancement of cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, launched in large urban circuits and large territorial systems, capable of making the offer more attractive, modern and appealing, and thus broadening the demand side - and more generally of cultural participation - by both local communities and tourists. But it can also strengthen the economic sectors and business chains connected to the protection, conservation, use, promotion,

and management of cultural heritage, in synergy with the investment in infrastructural equipment, to increase their competitive specialization, and strengthen their capacity for territorial integration. Finally, it can represent the tool for experimenting participatory and partnership forms in the reuse and management of cultural heritage assets, and more generally, of public assets otherwise abandoned or not used, capable of creating new values for local communities, not limited to the purely financial ones, rather favouring the establishment of new economies.

Should this not happen, 'culture' will always struggle to be a real driver in terms of revitalizing marginal areas, especially in the southern parts of the country, both in terms of economic and social cohesion.

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**Università degli Studi di Firenze**

**Lamia Hadda**, PhD et professeur agrégé en Histoire de l'architecture à l'Université de Florence, Département d'Architecture. Elle enseigne Culture Euro-Med à l'École EuroMed d'Architecture, de Design et d'Urbanisme de l'Université Euro-méditerranéenne de Fès-Maroc. Membre du collège doctoral en Architecture et membre du laboratoire Dar|Med.

**Saverio Mecca**, Architecte et professeur en Production de bâtiments à l'Université de Florence, Département d'architecture. Membre du Conseil exécutif de l'ISTEA et du Comité scientifique international sur le patrimoine architectural en terre ISCEAH-ICOMOS. Directeur du laboratoire Dar|Med du Département d'architecture.

**Giovanni Pancani**, Architecte et PhD, professeur agrégé de Relevé architectural à l'Université de Florence, Département d'Architecture. Il s'occupe des protocoles de certification des relevés par scanner laser et de la valorisation et conservation du patrimoine culturel de l'architecture méditerranéenne.

**Massimo Carta**, Architecte et PhD, professeur agrégé en Urbanisme à l'Université de Florence, Département d'architecture. Il enseigne Urbanisme à l'École EuroMed d'Architecture, de Design et d'Urbanisme de l'Université Euro-méditerranéenne de Fès-Maroc et à l'UNSBC de Tirana (Albanie).

**Fabio Fratini**, Chercheur du CNR-ISPC, Institut des Sciences du Patrimoine Culturel. Son activité de recherche porte sur l'archéométrie des matériaux utilisés dans l'architecture monumentale et vernaculaire et sur l'étude de dégradation finalisé à la conservation du patrimoine. Il est membre du Comité Permanent du RIPAM.

**Stefano Galassi**, Architecte et PhD, chercheur en Sciences du bâtiment à l'Université de Florence, Département d'architecture. Il enseigne Mécanique des structures à l'École EuroMed d'Architecture, de Design et d'Urbanisme de l'Université Euro-méditerranéenne de Fès-Maroc. Membre du collège doctoral en Architecture et membre du laboratoire Dar|Med.

**Daniela Pittaluga**, Professeur agrégé de restauration à l'Université de Gênes et responsable scientifique des projets de recherche. Membre et réviseur du comité scientifique des séries éditoriales, des revues nationales et internationales et membre du comité permanent du RIPAM.



Villages et quartiers à risque d'abandon sont aujourd'hui une problématique commune à des nombreuses régions de la Méditerranée, considérée comme un point stratégique dans les nouvelles politiques européennes. L'abandon progressif des zones internes est une constante dans les pays caractérisés par le sous-développement économique, avec les phénomènes d'émigration et de fragmentation du patrimoine culturel. Cela entraîne des problèmes d'architecture et de gestion du territoire. L'objectif principal de ce travail de recherche est de créer un espace de discussion qui comprend l'étude du patrimoine architectural et du paysage ainsi que les témoignages démo-ethno-anthropologiques.