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Stretch the Edge

Design Driven Processes for Reactivating
Small Walled Towns and Inland Areas

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Activate the Edges

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In the context of the *Stretch the Edge: Design driven processes for reactivating small walled towns and inland areas* conference, the session dedicated to the topic of 'Activation' gathered interesting contributions on the role of design as a trigger and vector of strategic processes for the cultural enhancement of heritage. Here, the term 'culture' is understood both in an anthropological sense, as a manifestation of the material, social and spiritual life of a people, and in an instrumental sense, as a vector for the formation of codes, norms and social orientations, as well as a powerful agent of imaginative stimulation (Bottos, 2024).

Design practices that leverage the potential of culture are well represented by the formulas of place-making, place-keeping and participatory design, which, by encouraging collective action, make people responsible for safeguarding and protecting their communal assets, as well as reactivating them if they are abandoned or underused. By reactivation we mean a particular formulation of the intervention on the built environment capable of producing lasting socio-spatial effects, strengthening the ecosystem of operators and improving the environment (Fanzini & Venturini, 2022; Ostanel, 2018).

The goal of this practice is to trigger a virtuous process of urban renewal that, feeding on the exchange between material and immaterial culture, is able to act on both the contents and the container, combining public and private interest to create innovation. Applying this practice to the improvement of small, isolated villages means connecting the resources of the territory to the immaterial processes that produce wealth, well-being, inclusiveness and a sense of belonging, creating networks that foster physical and social interaction with new governance models. In this regard, Ezio Manzini (2018) talks about transformative social innovation, which is a process when a group of people produces something new by assembling what they have in terms of products, places, infrastructures and knowledge, and in doing so they change their meaning by inventing ways of doing things that were previously unimaginable.

The speakers in the session addressed this particular variation of the participatory project, presenting specific examples and case studies with the aim of isolating the elements that characterize the contribution of design.

The presentation titled *Design Research Reload: Architectural Strategies for the Reactivation of a Rural Village in China* on the topic of innovative architectural design strategies for the redevelopment of a rural village in China, addressed the inequalities between urban and rural areas through advantageous redevelopment strategies that are attentive to the cultural and environmental aspects of the context. A fundamental role is played by the iterative method, in which the understanding of the site and the possible and potential design transformations are closely interconnected. The approach emphasizes the concept of 'dynamic ecology of practice' that favors the reactivation of places and the people who live in them.

The contribution *I live in Vaccarizzo. Social Transformation Lab for the repopulation of the Italian inland areas*, instead focused on the Social Transformation Laboratory as a tool for the repopulation of Italian inland regions. The innovative theory helps to transform social systems through a process of deep observation, co-creation and prototyping of new solutions for the future of the

community. A key aspect is represented by the activation of the local community involved in the process of co-designing the future of the village. The innovative use of 3D and 4D mapping tools allowed the community to visualize the current situation and the desired future of the village, identifying the internal dynamics and transformations necessary for change.

Restart Oliena – Innessi Urbani 2016-2024. A Reiterative and Participatory Regeneration Approach explored a very particular reiterative and participatory approach related to the urban regeneration of the historic village of Oliena, in Sardinia. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach involving experts in various fields (architecture, design, sociology, etc.) the project addressed the cultural, social, economic and environmental complexities of the local context, using design research to explore challenges and opportunities and then visualize scenarios of transformation and construction of possible futures for the community. The participatory approach, which mainly involved the collection of testimonies and the mapping of local resources, enabled the creation of a collective narrative capable of increasing the awareness of the population on the value of cultural identity.

The contribution *(Dis/Re)Articulate Contexts Identities: Places as Platforms for Community Regeneration and Interdependence* explored an innovative approach for community regeneration through the use of public spaces. The design directly involved the local community, promoting social inclusiveness and participation. The research approach emphasizes the importance of 'place' as a dynamic socio-physical unit, defined and transformed by agents over time. The place is not only seen as a physical space, but as a living and active entity that mediates between power and society, incorporating cultural, historical and social relations.

The paper *Slack City - Slack Land. Strategies, Processes and Projects for Intermediate Territories* focuses on urban planning and design strategies for intermediate agricultural and urban territories. The project introduces the concept of 'slack area' (available space, not necessarily built, within a homogeneous fabric) and transfers it from the urban to the agricultural context. This idea serves to identify spaces and areas with potential for regeneration and reuse, which could be reinterpreted to respond to local social, cultural and environmental needs. The research adopts a multifaceted approach, considering the regeneration of rural and urban areas through different lenses, including participatory design, cultural heritage valorization and new digital technologies. The aim is to strengthen local networks and promote integrated sustainable development, in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

In all the contributions, the role of conversation as a tool for engaging people to understand the local context and activate the community in a design-based way has clearly emerged. This also applies to interdisciplinary conversation, which allows design challenges to be addressed from different perspectives, creating more innovative and comprehensive solutions capable of mediating technical, social, cultural and environmental aspects.

Daniele Fanzini

Architect, PhD in 'Technical Innovation in Architectural Design', he is a professor of Architectural Technology in the ABC Department of the Politecnico di Milano. Author of more than 100 scientific publications, he is interested in the management of complex projects for architecture and territorial enhancement.

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