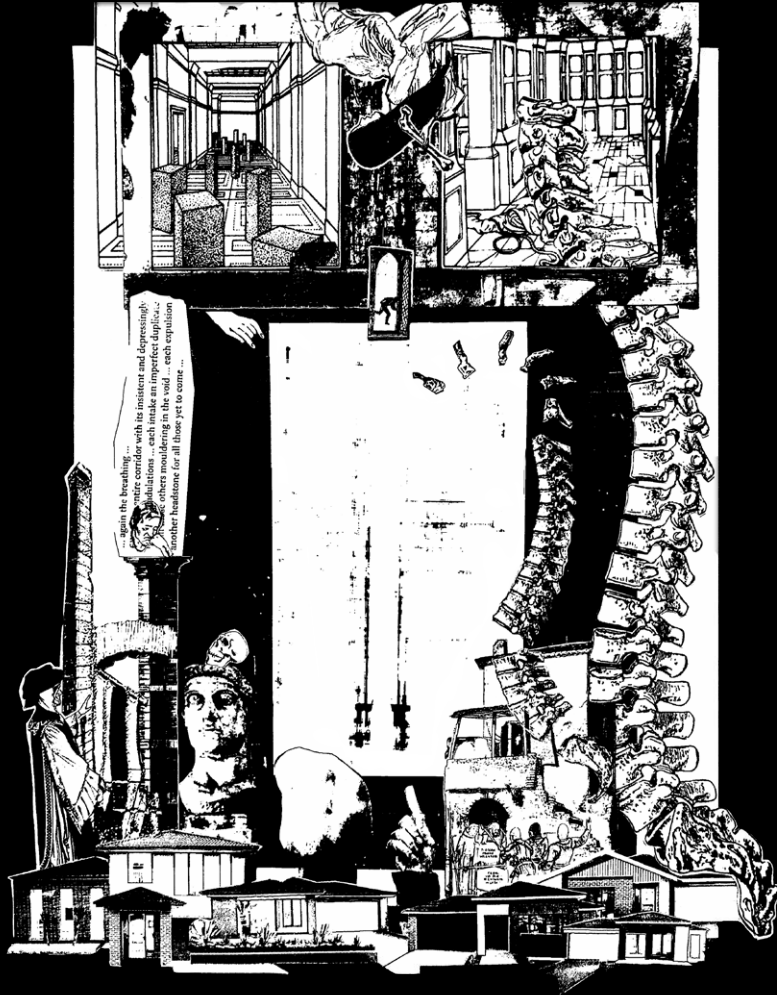


URBAN CORPORIS

TO THE BONES



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ANNA RICIPUTO

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01. Daniele Regis, Valeria Cottino, Dario Castellino e Giovanni Barberis, Regeneration project of Paraloup, Rittana (Italy), 2018. Photo by the authors.

Dorsum

Topography and Tectonic as Lenses of Inquiry for Architecture in Mountain and Rural Contexts

Francesco Airoldi PhD candidate in the Architectural Urban and Interior Design program at the Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture and Urban Studies. He graduated cum laude in Architecture and Urban Design at the Politecnico di Milano (2021) with a master thesis on the regeneration of the Valle Roveto inner area in Abruzzo, Italy. His doctoral research deals with architectural co-design strategies for transformation of fragile contexts, mitigation of risk and resilience of communities and territories.

Giulia Azzini PhD candidate in the Architectural Urban and Interior Design program at the Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture and Urban Studies. She graduated cum laude in Architecture and Urban Design at the Politecnico di Milano (2022) with a master thesis on the expansion project for the Cineteca in Bologna, Italy. Her doctoral research deals with design strategies for public spaces in mountain and fragile areas.

Keywords: Tectonic, Topography, Rural, Marginalities, Identity

Abstract

The term dorsum was used by the Latins not only for the backs of animate beings – and thus their spines – but also to refer to mountain ridges. This statement evokes an essential image of the mountain or rural landscape, in which type-morphological aspects and the human skeleton stand in analogy. Thus, orography becomes backbone, supporting the position of settlements; artifacts become bones, elements carried and dependent on the landline in their form; infrastructures are the limbs, ruins the fractures. To this reading, an additional element can be added, that of communities, actors who modify the physiology of the organism to inhabit it.

Staying within this metaphor, the contribution aims to accompany the transition from the territorial to the architectural scale to identify possible approaches that allow for a contemporary interpretation of history, tradition and memory: the fragilities of these contexts take on a different connotation when explored through the lenses of topography and tectonic, essential methodological tools of architecture that locate in the design process the cultural environment for territorial development, reducing “to the bones” the site-specific design topics and the possible attitudes to front them.

Through an analysis of case studies that reread the forms, ecologies, and meanings of vernacular architecture in minor contexts, a critical gaze is proposed considering “pride in modesty” (Sabatino, 2010) as a guiding sentiment for the formulation of design methodologies that put the spatial experience of humans in co-existential relationship with nature at the center of the discourse. This is intended to help stimulate a disciplinary debate on the necessary adaptation of architectural design paradigms in villages, hamlets and marginal places, in order to conceive and propose projects adapted to today’s needs of small settlements in mountainous and rural contexts.

The morphology of mountain and rural contexts as the backbone of places

The image of the skeleton, besides referring to the idea of support, represents a system connecting different parts whose cooperation is essential for the survival of an organism. On a more conceptual level, the skeleton has a permanence value, opposing the nature of the body which is essentially mobile and temporary.

In mountain and rural contexts, characterized by a complex orographic articulation and an altitudinal development, the territorial morphology takes on the same role of the backbone in the skeletal system: as a support, it results in a sloping line which can be read as a defining element for spatial and architectural configuration, holden up in relation to the forms of the land; as a connector, the line of the soil ties together the scattered bones defined by the human traces, such as settlements and infrastructures; as a permanence, finally, morphology marks the co-presence of landscape and built environment, reaffirming the persistent bond of mutual influence between nature, inhabited and regulated by men, and the latter, who obtain their means of subsistence from nature. These links enjoy many levels of meaning, since they have the faculty to embody the history of the place and its future transformation over time.

Despite the complex morphology and the resulting environmental and socio-economic criticalities (Carrosio and Faccini, 2018, p. 66), the skeleton metaphor shows how mountain and rural contexts embody elements of both complexity and richness, alternatives to the human needs for space, nature, community, and creativity currently booming in popular culture (Oltmanns, 2016, p. 58). An idea well synthesized by the artist Maria Lai in her artwork *Legarsi alla Montagna* (1981), deciding to literally tie together the houses of Ulassai, in Sardinia, with the mountain where they arise, suggesting the existing complicity between community and territory.

If the mission of architecture consists in the modification of places giving them identity meanings, it is precisely in this intrinsic bond that the peculiarity of the relationship between the mountain and its inhabitants should be sought: the environmental care and the survival of the population as mutually influenced factors, which inevitably lead to the search for and construction of a balance with nature, in the innate awareness of the deep interaction between all forms of life (Vergottini, 2001, p. 42). In fact, if on the one hand men have been able to make the habitability of high altitudes possible, transforming the land both productively and morphologically (Bätzing, 2005) through a rational approach, on the other, they have built an environment with a sustainable vocation, as it is able to integrate ecological aspects with economic, technological and social ones (Tronconi, 2008, p. 10): a tradition of uses, techniques and materials in respect of the environment and particularly linked to the place, its climatic and morphological features and its capacity to provide resources (Del Curto and Menini, 2018).

Architecture of the essential: “to the bones” approaches

Today, the narration of mountain and rural places is no longer linked to the productive functions that determined their characteristics in the past. The diffusion of ecological thought and the awareness of their natural and cultural heritage have allowed these territories to acquire symbolic and economic values, potential catalysts for possible reinvention. But this new emerging image of minor contexts is not the only possible perspective. By observing the structure of rural settlements in their historical development – as well as some features of the architecture that constitutes their built environment – it is possible to grasp some principles of ecology deeply rooted in memory and tradition of places.

Especially in contexts with heterogeneous morphology, architecture must interface with issues related to coexistence, adaptivity, and sustainability as well as to memory, tradition and his-

tory. From this passage, it becomes clear how the concepts of place and identity are mutually related, since:

human identity presupposes the identity of place” and vice versa: “it is not only important that our environment has a spatial structure which facilitates orientation, but that it consists of concrete objects of identification (Norberg-Schulz, 1979, p. 179).

The thread of the body metaphor can then take on a further declination: the parallelism between the spatial structure of the environment and the concreteness of the “objects of identification” (*ibidem*), suggests the existence of a link between the form of the territory and that of the architecture, expressed by topography and tectonic, which helps to move the focus from the regional scale to the architectural one.

[Topography] incorporates the built and unbuilt terrain [...] and architecture can investigate its topographical significance if it recognizes the essential aspects of the landscape (Leatherbarrow, 2004, p. 12).

Moving from topographical consideration, in the 1983 essay *Towards a Critical Regionalism*, Kenneth Frampton warns of the risk of a widespread “placelessness”, a loss of meaning of places as identity crisis from both social and spatial perspectives. He investigates a possible approach to address the paradox between local culture and global civilization, facing the phenomenon of the “universalization of cultures” (Frampton, 1983, p. 24) and theorizing the strategy of a critical regionalism: a design attitude based on the search for a place-form link historically present in vernacular and pre-modern architecture and which can be expressed in a context-sensitive modification. The reinterpretation of typo-morphological characteristics of the past, of traditional technologies and of vernacular elements that contemporary architecture can pursue, necessarily passes from a dialectical relationship with nature, which involves the concepts of context, climate, light and – above all – topography and tectonic form:

[...] the primary principle of architectural autonomy resides in the tectonic rather than the scenographic: [...] in the revealed ligaments of the construction and in the way in which the syntactical form of the structure explicitly resists the action of gravity (Frampton, 1983, p. 27).

Promoting an essential approach “to the bones” finds its reasons in the recognition of the identity of places and seeks a compositional and formal essentiality in respect of the territory and its characteristics. The necessary adaptation of architectural design paradigms in marginal places, requires the expression of possible design actions to conceive and propose projects adapted to today’s needs of small settlements.

The idea of a critical reinterpretation of themes related to vernacular architecture for possible application in modern design has deep roots. Two of the earliest researches on the subject sees their outcomes in the 1936 exhibition of Triennale in Milan *Architettura Rurale Italiana* curated by Giuseppe Pagano and Guarniero Daniel, and in the one of 1964 *Architecture Without Architects* set up at MoMA in New York by Bernard Rudofsky: recognized as founding moments in the consciousness-raising of the vernacular as an antithesis to the culture of the modern, this event invited a reflection on the origin of architecture as a product of the context, when humans welcomed the variety of climate and the challenges of topography rather than trying to conquer

the nature (Rudofsky, 1964, p. 3). They showcase a different idea of modernity that, in contrast to the benefits of industrial production and especially to homogenization, works on traces, testifying to the value of complicity among humans in the construction of the spaces of everyday life (Gotti Porcinari, 2020, p. 94).

Contemporary architectural re-interpretations in fragile contexts

Picking up a concept of ecology of settlements, conceived as the practice of environmental conservation and transformation concerning the interactions of inhabitants with their social and geographical place, architectural design plays a central role in helping to define a place of exchange between humans and the environment, physically determinable through the space of architecture and territory (De Rossi *et al.*, 2022, p. 8).

Through an analysis of best practices it is possible to investigate the characteristics of an effective and reactive transformation of these contexts, focusing on spatial solutions of interesting architectural interventions at different scales of action and showing their ability to re-read endogenous properties, re-elaborating the settlement typology of the village as a sustainable archetype for a contemporary architecture, capable of reinterpreting the ecologies of the past and enhancing the identity of places.

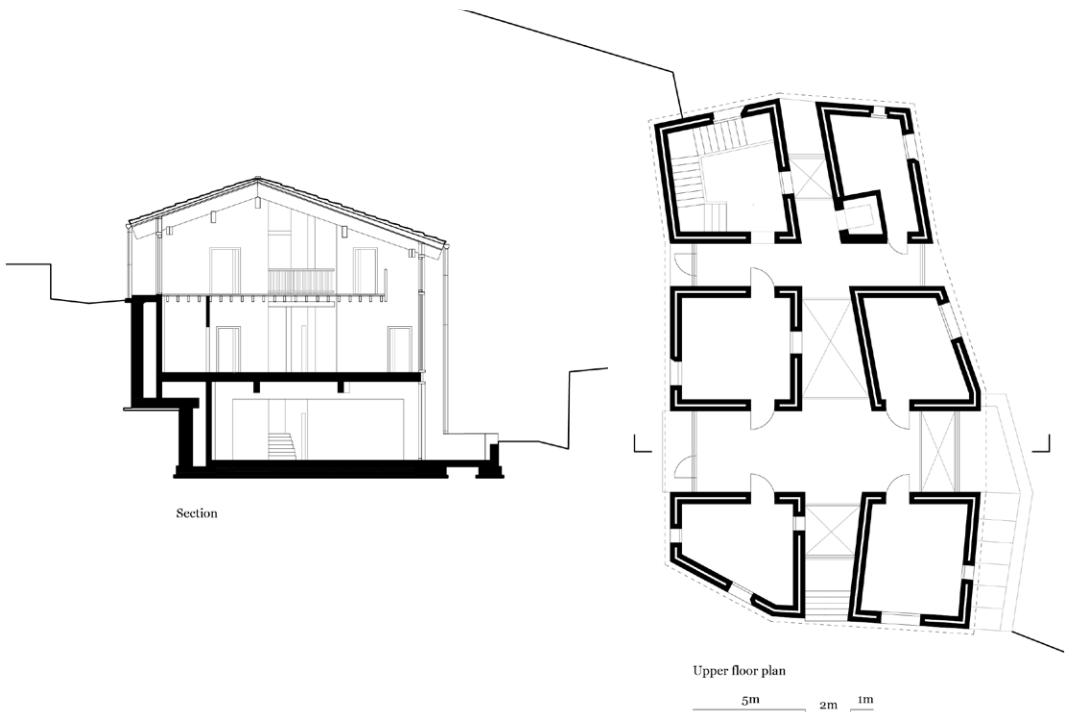
In Italy, nowadays some interesting initiatives turned the spotlight on the architectural issues of inner peripheries and territorial fragilities. One of the most recent was *Arcipelago Italia*, the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale curated by Mario Cucinella. As can be seen in the catalog of the exhibition, the re-reading of architectural tradition with contemporary approach – through the lens of tectonic forms and topography – is a design theme that accompanied both the work of the research team and the selection of the projects on display. Some virtuous examples in these contexts are the interventions that have taken place over the years in Piedmont's alpine settlements, as in the case of the *Regeneration project of Paraloup* (Rittana, CN) inaugurated in 2018, or of numerous projects for the recovery of buildings and open spaces in the settlements of Ostana (CN), coordinated by research groups from the Politecnico di Torino.

The *Lou Pourtoun Cultural Center* (2015) is the most significant new architecture in Ostana, a re-interpretation of a local typology with strong identity value and offering the community an opportunity for social and demographic revitalization (Crotti, 2016, pp. 17-21). “Lou Pourtoun” means “the great door” in the local dialect and it is the name of the new built complex that rises in the heart of the hamlet of Sant'Antonio: its layout takes up an architectural configuration that characterizes the villages of the Po Valley, a covered road, the ancient “pourtoun” which follows the level curve, overlooked by some small volumes from both sides, upstream and downstream. In the past, it represented the meeting place of the inhabitants, a public space between private buildings that guaranteed shelter from snow and rain in the coldest months. If the choice of local materials already shows, at first glance, a context-sensitive design approach, it is in the building's layout that the strength of a critical reinterpretation of the settlement typology stands out: adapting to the steep slope of the ground, it is organized on three levels, each with its own entrance located at a certain elevation of the slope, as in ancient alpine constructions.

Another significant case study is the French *Maison de Santé* (2014), designed by Bernard Quirot Architectes + Associés at the foot of the hill of Vézelay. The complex, articulated in several slightly staggered and differently oriented volumes, in its extreme formal simplicity seeks that intimate connection between architecture and place advocated by Frampton too: on the one hand it uses an essential and archetypal language – parallelepipeds covered by a pitched roof – referring to the local building tradition, rejecting any stylistic exaggeration in order to let the



02. Massimo Crotti, Antonio De Rossi, Marie-Pierre Forsans, Lou Pourtoun Cultural Centre, Ostana (Italy), 2015. Photo by the authors.



03. Massimo Crotti, Antonio De Rossi, Marie-Pierre Forsans, Lou Pourtoun Cultural Centre, Ostana (Italy), 2015. Graphic reworking by the authors.



04. Bernard Quirot Architectes + Associés, Maison de Santé, Vézelay (France), 2014. Graphic reworking by the authors.



05. Bernard Quirot Architectes + Associés, Maison de Santé, Vézelay (France), 2014. Graphic reworking by the authors.

richness of composition and proportions prevail; on the other hand, it composes the volumes through the logic offered by the topography and existing buildings, proposing various shots of the hill and the village above. The result is the design of a place that, located on the border between the city and the countryside, connects their qualities and specificities, proposing a spatial model attentive to the coexistence and adaptivity of the two spheres.

Conclusion

If previously the attention of architecture and urban planning had been directed more or less exclusively to the city (Carlow, 2016, p. 6), suggesting a radical as well as simplistic dichotomy between urban and rural places, today the idea is that a model of sustainable development for the future must be sought precisely in minor contexts (Koolhaas, 2020, p. 3). In this sense, the proposed case studies offer interesting insights into how architectural design can interface with the issues of territorial fragilities, adopting an approach sensitive to tectonic and topography, reducing the relationship between architecture and territory to its essence, or “to the bones”. The proposed enhancement of the landscape and historical heritage is thus possible with the reinterpretation of past ecologies, a “critical regionalism” (Frampton, 1983) based on re-reading of tradition, history and memory that develop new visions for the future through the study of topological and tectonic relationships and their use in architectural design.

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A BOOK ON ARCHITECTURE, ART, PHILOSOPHY AND URBAN STUDIES TO NOURISH THE URBAN BODY.

The second volume of *Urban Corporis*, titled "To the Bones", compiles reflections from architects, artists, and scholars who have extensively delved into the fundamental themes of contemporary architecture. By navigating a constant interplay between past and future, memory and innovation, and the realms of the natural, artificial, and virtual, these contributions put forth strategies for architectural, artistic, urban, and landscape projects that resonate with the fundamental principles shaping our built and perceived environment. They advocate for design approaches that synchronise with the foundational elements, referred to as "the bones", that structure the landscape while promoting forward-thinking considerations.