

Sustainable tourism and development: the model of the Albergo Diffuso

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Abstract

Purpose – In the light of contemporary tourist trends, this paper aims to provide insight on the topicality of the Albergo Diffuso Model, more than 30 years since this concept was developed.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is not based on any particular methodological approach, as it is a practitioner viewpoint paper. It describes both, the contemporary tourist trends and the Albergo Diffuso Model, its main characteristics and some organizational issues.

Findings – The Albergo Diffuso is still a model worth implementing as it is relevant for the sustainable development of the Italian territory and of its treasures and to showcase the local traditions and the qualities of the Italian lifestyle. The Italian Government, too, has acknowledged its potential by means of some recent initiatives.

Originality/value – This paper highlights the value of the Albergo Diffuso Model as a tool to match the peculiar features of the Italian territory, local development and the contemporary tourist trends.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, Tourism experience, Albergo Diffuso, Hospitality industry and development

Paper type: Viewpoint

Foreword

The Albergo Diffuso is a specific form of hospitality: tourists stay in formerly abandoned houses that have been renovated to become the rooms of the Albergo Diffuso. This means that there is no “all-in-one” hotel based in one building only, but rather the accommodation facility is disseminated and scattered over the territory. The houses forming the Albergo Diffuso are not located too far from one another and from the building that hosts the common services to support the whole community hotel, for example, the reception and the restaurant. This way the Albergo Diffuso can provide a form of homelike accommodation with hotel-level services[1].

The first idea of the Albergo Diffuso originated during the reconstruction that followed the 1976 earthquake in the area of Carnia, in the Italian northeast region of Friuli Venezia Giulia (Dall’Ara and Di Bernardo, 2014). The Albergo Diffuso can be considered an instrument for the sustainable development of many small Italian towns, which have been abandoned and fallen into decline not only because of external natural causes (hydrogeological disruption, earthquakes, etc.) but also because of internal socioeconomic causes (economic decay and depopulation as a consequence of social changes).

By means of the Albergo Diffuso Model, the tourism industry can promote the recovery and upgrading of the wealthy material and cultural heritage scattered in the smaller towns otherwise doomed to abandonment and decay; it may infuse new life into these places and relaunch the local economy with no need for invasive interventions on the environment.

This paper offers some considerations on the topicality of the Albergo Diffuso Model in the light of contemporary tourist trends; these can favor sustainable tourism by revamping local traditions and highlighting the quality of the Italian style. The paper also describes the Albergo Diffuso Model, its major characteristics and some organizational issues.

Contemporary trends in tourism and the Albergo Diffuso

Given its historical and geographical characteristics, Italy boasts an extremely rich offer of cultural, artistic and wine-and-food traditions that are widely present all over its territory. The territory itself displays extremely varied landscapes and settings. This peculiarity can make the most of the competitive advantage offered by the Albergo Diffuso: a model that is able to bring to light the local culture, the local peculiarities and specializations. This is perfectly aligned with the contemporary trend of having more and more segmented tourist destinations with special attention to the niche markets (Trunfio *et al.*, 2006; Chenguang Wu *et al.*, 2017).

By way of example, international literature shows a growing interest in food-and-wine tourism: just think of the attention paid to wine tourism (Marzo-Navarro and Pedraja-Iglesias, 2009; Alonso, 2009; Alonso and Liu, 2010; Zhang Qiu *et al.*, 2013) and to food tourism, which are also used as a tool to characterize and differentiate tourist proposals (Okumus *et al.*, 2007).

According to the national observatory on tourism (Osservatorio Nazionale del Turismo), while the arts and culture are the first reasons why tourists choose Italy (13.3 per cent), the second main reason (8.7 per cent) is the food-and-wine offer, which “points to a precise and truthful search for real typical dishes”. During their stay in Italy, “32.2 per cent of tourists taste typical local food like pasta, cakes and sweets, oil and cheeses and wines” (Osservatorio Nazionale del Turismo, 2014).

Also, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) highlights that:

Tourism is a major part of the contemporary experience economy, in which food plays an important role. Food is a key part of all cultures, a major element of global intangible heritage and an increasingly important attraction for tourists. The linkages between food and tourism also provide a platform for local economic development, which can be strengthened by the use of food experiences for branding and marketing destinations (OECD, 2012).

But well beyond the extremely rich food-and-wine offer of Italy, which varies from one small urban center to another, more important still is the ability of the villages to generate an unforgettable tourist experience that is not limited to wine and food (Quan and Wang, 2004; Okumus *et al.*, 2007).

This ability is growing in importance: it is not by chance that experts talk of *tourism experience*.

Among the first researchers who developed the concept of *customer experience* were B.J. Pine and J.H. Gilmore (Pine and Gilmore, 1998).

The focus shifts from the service provided to the customer to the personal experience that is proposed to a customer, or the tourist, as in our case. To achieve full customer satisfaction, you need to rouse their emotions, minds and spiritual side by involving them in a unique experience (Uriely, 2005; Williams, 2006).

This concept has been expanded in many ways and now embraces the social and interpersonal contexts as well, with the possibility of experiencing new behaviors and lifestyles that are alternative to the customary, daily ones (for an extensive review of the concepts of customer experience, see: Brent Ritchie *et al.*, 2011; Hwang and Seo, 2016).

One of the major challenges in the experience economy is dealing with the shift toward intangible culture and heritage. The focus of many tourists has changed from the classic “must-see” physical sights such as museums and monuments toward a “must-experience” imperative to consume intangible expressions of culture, such as atmosphere, creativity and lifestyle. This provides new opportunities for tourism destinations as well as new challenges, particularly in the areas of experience development, marketing and branding (OECD, 2012).

Indeed, tourists see holidays not only as a time for fun only but also as an opportunity to enrich their education. The journey and stay in different places are opportunities to know and test different lifestyles. This new vision of tourism stimulates the search for true experiences, far away from the usual routes and tours designed for an undifferentiated clientele, or from the standardized mass-tourism products. This new generation of tourists includes also the supporters of “sustainable tourism”, a new category that includes all those facilities that do not alter the environment and do not damage other economic businesses.

The Albergo Diffuso meets the above-described requirements for the new generation of tourists; it offers the experience of living in a village or in an old town center following the rhythms and the traditions of the local community. This new type of tourist is in search for nontraditional destinations and accommodations; they prefer sustainable forms of hospitality, which are original and typical of a specific location. These tourists also care about the peculiarities of the places, the originality and genuineness of experiences and knowledge: culture, traditions, typical food products and local lifestyles.

Another contemporary trend is “slow tourism”, or the answer to the demand for a slower pace of life that is particularly felt during the holidays. This generates a considerable impact on tourism demand and on some other aspects like increased use of trains as a means of transport (as travel is now seen as a part of the holiday), greater attention to those proposals that are felt as being natural, sustainable and having a low impact on the environment. For instance, 41.5 per cent of tourists go on excursions and trips during their stay in Italy: 57 per cent of these prefer riding a bicycle (Osservatorio Nazionale del Turismo, 2014).

Again, the Osservatorio Nazionale del Turismo highlights that:

[...] among the features that are more strongly related to the idea of a positive stay in Italy is the importance of human relations made possible by the hospitality of the people (40.7 per cent on average), a basic element for the tourists who decide to visit Italy (Osservatorio Nazionale del Turismo, 2014).

After many years since its conception, the Albergo Diffuso is now playing a role that is in line with the current international tourism trends, although preserving or, rather, enhancing the cultural and traditional local specificities that are features of the Italian lifestyle.

The model of the Albergo Diffuso

Its origins

The first idea of the Albergo Diffuso originated in the area of Carnia, in the Italian northeast region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, during the reconstruction that followed the 1976 earthquake. To bring new life to some abandoned villages, some thought to turn them into tourist establishments.

The expression “Albergo Diffuso” was pronounced for the first time in 1982 for the tourism promotion project of the village of Comeglians, financed by the European Union. However, it was only toward the end of the 1980s that the concept of albergo diffuso acquired its specific physiognomy, which is linked not only to the recovery and changeover of buildings for hotel use but also to a wider and organic project linked to the peculiar and specific features of the territory.

This concept was more suitably embodied in the “Progetto Turismo” project proposed by the municipality of San Leo in 1989. According to this project, all the houses and flats available for rent in the village would have been placed under a single entrepreneurial management initiative and turned into hotel rooms, with hotel services set in a remarkable historical and cultural context. The project was not implemented (Dall’Ara and Di Bernardo, 2014; Dall’Ara, 2015).

The first example of the Albergo Diffuso dates back to 1995 with the Tourist Development Plan for the Mountain Community of Marghine Planargia (Nuoro, Sardinia)[2]. This plan served as the starting point for the Regional Law (LR, 1998) passed in Sardinia, the first ever to define and regulate this new form of hospitality.

Today the concept of Albergo Diffuso is present in the laws of all the regions of Italy (Villani and Dall’Ara, 2015), but in the past, the lack of relevant regulations – compounded by cultural opposition and organizational difficulties – has long blocked the dissemination of this model of hospitality.

In 2006, the Association of the Albergo Diffuso was established (Associazione Nazionale Alberghi Diffusi – ADI) with the task of promoting and supporting its development and guaranteeing a quality offer[3].

The features of the Albergo Diffuso

Professor Dall’Ara, the expert who coined the definition of the Albergo Diffuso Model, states:

The name of “Albergo Diffuso” is given to all those hotels that provide accommodation and other services in rooms that are located in various separate buildings, that existed before the hotel and rise in a historical town centre. These buildings are interconnected one to the other by means of a single building that serves as reception hall and offers rooms for common activities or for other services. The housing units are never more than 200 meters away from the reception building; their style shall be identifiable, uniform and in line with the identity of the place. They shall be fitted with furniture, fittings and services that are homogeneous among them (Dall’Ara and Di Bernardo, 2014).

The analysis of this definition points out some peculiar and distinguishing features of the Albergo Diffuso.

First, it is a true hotel under a single, entrepreneurial-style management. This means that an entrepreneur or a company are managing the accommodation facilities and provide all the services.

Indeed regarding the reception of guests, to be classified as hotels under the Italian regulation (LR, 1998) these facilities must be placed under a single management and have no less than seven rooms.

Therefore, this is no spontaneous accommodation depending upon the good will of the local inhabitants. It is a professionally managed facility, though not a standard one. The buildings containing the rooms for tourists are assigned to the hotel function only, i.e. they are not inhabited by other residents.

The Albergo Diffuso provides all hotel services. It is advisable to provide three-star hotel equivalent services. More specifically, the Albergo Diffuso must have a single and centralized reception hall, which must be no more than 200 meters away from the buildings where the rooms are located and it must provide breakfast and cleaning services. It may provide – although these are not compulsory – a restaurant and a shuttle service to the main attractions on the territory.

Another feature is the rooms being located in various previously existing buildings. This means that you do not need to build new buildings to create an Albergo Diffuso: you can

simply recover and reuse the buildings that are already in town, renovating and furnishing them according to the local tradition and style.

The model of the Albergo Diffuso is characterized by its underlying philosophy: the idea of offering demanding and curious tourists a holiday immersed in the territory, which can in turn give unique and true experiences because tourists are enabled to participate to the life and the rhythms of the village, while staying in typical houses that are very different from the usual uniform accommodation facilities[4].

Regarding the territorial context, this should be characterized by a cultural, historical, landscape and food and wine heritage that are traditional and of high quality (local cuisine shall prevail). The village must be inhabited by its own community on a permanent basis and made livelier by events and shows so that the tourists may participate in the local way of life.

Organizational aspects of the Albergo Diffuso

Let us now analyze some organizational factors that characterize and identify the Albergo Diffuso and differentiate it from other accommodation/tourist proposals³ (Dall'Ara, 2015).

Several aspects should be taken into consideration before a village may be turned into an Albergo Diffuso: from architectural renovation and upgrading to the organization, management and promotion of the tourist–hotel activity.

The village. Not all villages have the necessary features to start this type of project. The initiative should be preceded by an economic feasibility study and by quality and quantitative analyses to assess the potential and the criticalities of tourism and property development initiatives in the area.

The presence of some factors on the territory is mandatory for the success of this initiative[5]:

- surrounding areas that look attractive for tourists (countryside, seaside, mountains, archeological sites, castles, spas, ancient worship and pilgrimage destinations);
- elements and evidences of the local popular culture and typical materials (handmade products, food and wine, folklore, events and shows);
- the availability of the basic services in the village (chemists and grocers);
- the presence of a lively local community that is willing to share its lifestyle with the guests; and
- the possibility to characterize the Albergo Diffuso according to some themes that attract the “specialized” tourism (wellness, music, culture, food and natural products).

Another major requirement is to have enough rooms (no less than seven) located at a reasonable distance one from the others and from the building hosting the common services.

The buildings should mirror the traditional local architectural features and be potentially fit to house the new destination of use as an accommodation facility.

Investors. Usually, the initiative may stem from an investor who buys or rents the buildings for a reasonable period of time and manages the hotel as well; or from a group of local players who form a consortium and entrust the management to a third party, a hotel operator willing to manage the business according to the Albergo Diffuso philosophy (IDEASS ITALY, 2016).

Of course, the support of the local administration is paramount to make bureaucratic procedures easier and to favor the investments in infrastructures and street furniture.

In several cases, the initiative is a public one, with the municipality starting the retrofitting project with the upgrading of the building stock of the village. The municipality then looks for private partners to complete the project and manage the reception facility.

The local and governmental administrations might see the Albergo Diffuso project as an interesting tool to develop the territory, increase tourist flows and relaunch local entrepreneurship. The funds required to start the operation may be provided by private (or institutional) investors and operators or by domestic and EU public funds.

The main costs of the operation are the purchase (or the rent) of the buildings, although prices are generally low as the buildings are often in a state of abandonment and decay and the refurbishment of the buildings and their adaptation to the new function.

The manager should know that the Albergo Diffuso may cause some diseconomies during the management phase because of the dispersion of the buildings in the village and for the need to provide centralized and standardized services (Dall'Ara and Di Bernardo, 2014).

The local community. Another basic consideration to be made when developing an Albergo Diffuso is the involvement of the local community: the initial idea should be proposed during an event that highlights the advantages for the local population, for the local entrepreneurs and local economic operators.

It is of paramount importance, indeed, that the Albergo Diffuso is set and integrated into the system that produces and markets the local products (wineries, small handicraft workshops, local markets and fairs).

For the Albergo Diffuso to attract tourists, several initiatives must be organized, like events, excursions and visits: the Albergo Diffuso must be integrated with the attractions on the territory (rural landscapes, parks and archeological sites).

Promotion of the Albergo Diffuso. Equally important is the promotion of the project, which can take place via the professional organized network (tour operators, travel agents and web marketing) and with the involvement of non-professional players (leisure time associations, sports clubs, religious associations, recreation centers, schools and the University of the Third Age).

The Albergo Diffuso may be promoted through territorial marketing projects and at tourist trade shows as the it may help tourist operators differentiate their offer.

Training. Another aspect worth considering is training: higher-education programs about the tourist and hotel industry usually promote the development of the managerial skills required by large hotel groups or traditional forms of hospitality.

Regarding the employment capacity, in the class "hotels and similar accommodation", the available figures for the year 2013 reveal that in Italy as many as 78 per cent of enterprises employ from 0 to 9 persons; this means that Italian accommodation establishments are often family-run[6].

The Italian situation would require more cross-sectional competences not only for the economic sector but also related to staff management and to marketing, which are suitable for the features and the small size of the enterprises that make up the Italian hotel industry (CSES, 2016).

State-of-the-art in Italy

The Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) divides collective accommodation establishments between hotels and similar accommodation (classified into five categories and hotel-tourism residences – RTA) and other collective accommodation establishments (tourist campsites, holiday villages, tourist campsites and holiday villages-mixed forms, holiday dwellings (rented), farmhouses, youth hostels, holidays homes, mountain refuges, other accommodation, bed and breakfast and other private accommodations).

The Albergo Diffuso is included in the “hotels and similar accommodation” category (ISTAT, 2015).

The ISTAT figures for the year 2014 report 158,412 collective accommodation establishments in Italy, of which 33,290 are hotels and similar accommodation, with 2,241,239 bed-places[7].

In April 2014, there were 82 Albergo Diffuso in 19 regions of Italy (Dall’Ara and Di Bernardo, 2014), which shows arising trend. As in December 2011, there were 56 Albergo Diffuso in 15 regions[8] (Figure 1).

The figures (Villani and Dall’Ara, 2015) concerning the guests show a certain degree of internationalization: 46.6 per cent of guests are foreign; average stay is of 2/3 nights (2.5) with an average occupation rate of 68 per cent.

Nationwide, in 2014, the presence of foreign tourists in hotels and similar accommodation was 50 per cent. Average total stay was 3.03 nights⁶.

Regarding the gross use of beds, this equaled 30.6 per cent while net use was of 40.6 per cent [9].

The analysis of the establishments censused on the website of ADI³ offers an opportunity for some considerations.

Overall, 85 facilities are listed, which are inspired by the Albergo Diffuso principles: the region with the highest number of facilities is Sardinia at 11, followed by Latium and Tuscany at 8, Umbria at 7 and Marche, Molise and Sicily at 6 (Figure 2).

Regarding provinces, the first is Oristano (Sardinia) at 7, followed by Perugia (Umbria) and Pesaro Urbino (Marche) at 6, Campobasso (Molise) at 5, Bari (Puglia) and Udine (Friuli Venezia-Giulia) at 4.

Of all, 22.4 per cent of hotels are located in regions in the north of Italy, 34.1 per cent in the center and 43.5 per cent in the south and on the islands (Figure 3).

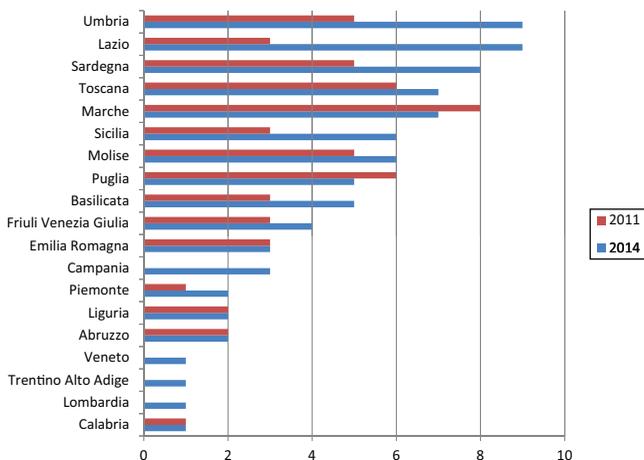


Figure 1. Comparison between the number of Albergo Diffuso in 2011 and in 2014, per region

Source: Authors’ processing of the figures from www.albergodiffuso.com/report-sullalbergo-diffuso-2014.html and <http://albergo-diffuso.blogspot.it/2011/12/tutti-i-numeri-dellalbergo-diffuso.html>

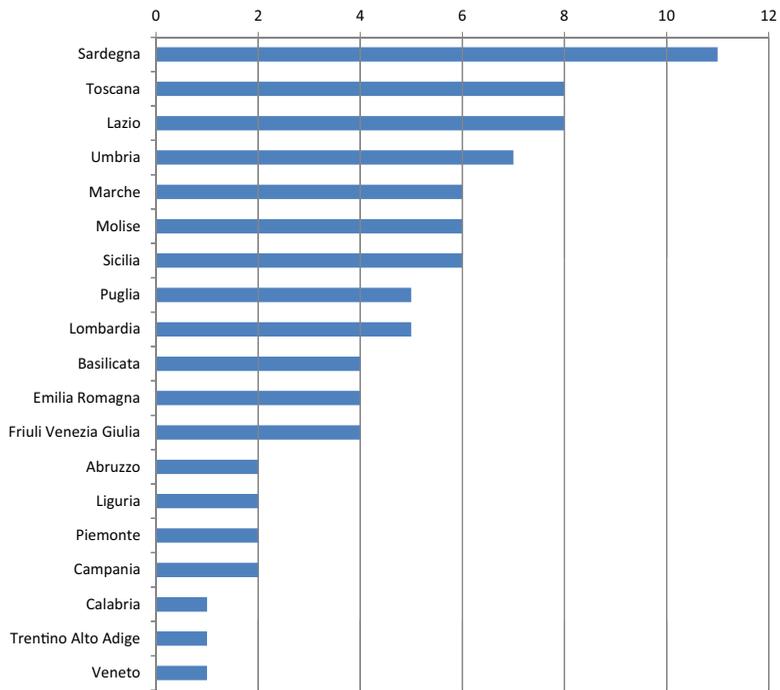


Figure 2.
Number of facilities listed on the National Association of Albergo Diffuso website per region

Source: Authors' processing of the figures on www.alberghidiffusi.it/-, 18 July 2016

More specifically, 51 per cent of the facilities are located in municipalities with an area smaller than 50 km²; 25 per cent have less than 1,000 inhabitants and 64 per cent have less than 5,000 inhabitants[10] (Figure 4).

Regarding altitude above sea level (as noted by ISTAT), 61 per cent of the facilities are located in municipalities that rise above 300 meters above sea level.

Also based on the ISTAT classifications, 42.4 per cent are in the mountains, 55.2 per cent on the hills and 2.4 per cent on a plain. Seventy-two per cent of facilities are located in scarcely populated (rural) municipalities. Thirteen facilities are based in municipalities that are classified as coastal villages by ISTAT, or 15 per cent of the whole[11] (Figure 5).

These are small municipalities on average in terms of their geographical size and population and are located in inland, hilly areas.

Regarding the characteristics of the municipalities where such facilities rise and considering median values, the number of inhabitants is 2,383, the geographical area is of 49.6 km² and altitude above sea level is 401 m.

Examples

The village of Santo Stefano di Sessanio

The village of Santo Stefano di Sessanio² rises at the foot of the Gran Sasso in the Abruzzo region.

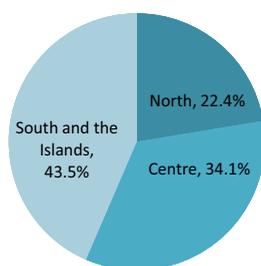
Its depopulation started in the 1950s. In 1999, Daniele Kihlgren, a private citizen, decided to purchase some houses in ruins without any public funds: he restored them by using local materials and furnished them with farmers' renovated furniture and traditional furnishing accessories (sheets and tablecloths made with traditional looms – blankets dyed with natural colors).

This was the origin of one of the first Albergo Diffuso, with the rooms scattered in various houses so that the guests could live among the people of the village and contribute to bringing life back to it.

Afterward, other inhabitants began to renovate buildings with the same care so much so that despite the devastating earthquake that struck the Abruzzo region in 2009, the renovated houses suffered minimum damage.

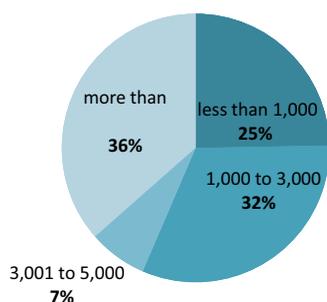
The project was designed to recover the authentic nature of the original building stock through careful restoration work and upgrade the systems (district heating and internet) while respecting the original architectural structure.

The Sextantio project was pioneering in that it anticipated the trends of the tourism business that is increasingly interested in the folkloric, anthropological and cultural aspects of local traditions.



Source: Authors' processing of the figures on www.alberghidiffusi.it/-, 18 July 2016

Figure 3. Location of the facilities listed on the National Association of Albergo Diffuso website per geographical distribution



Source: Authors' processing of the figures on www.alberghidiffusi.it/-, 18 July 2016

Figure 4. Municipalities where the facilities listed on the National Association of Albergo Diffuso website are located, by number of inhabitants

In Sextantio, guests live in traditional houses and take part in the life of the village within a natural, uncontaminated setting.

Moreover, Sextantio is a model of territory management addressed to regenerating the social and economic life of the Abruzzo and to creating a new local entrepreneurship (Paniccia *et al.*, 2007) by opening shops selling handmade products (goldsmith, textiles and ceramics), purchasing lands to develop typical local food and wine businesses (typical cultivations like lentils, chickpeas, spelt, almonds and *crocus sativus*, which yields high-quality saffron and the production of goat cheese *pecorino* and pasta).

Finally, the project was able to stimulate the tourist, accommodation and residential development, to safeguard the original historical-architectural heritage, landscape and customs and habits of its inhabitants; it promoted the economy of the territory while avoiding the erection of new buildings.

Sant'Angelo Luxury Resort in Matera

The Sant'Angelo Luxury Resort [12] rises in Matera, in the historical center of the "Sassi" (declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO).

The structure developed around the central body of a palace, in a strategic location for the tourist and cultural routes in the city.

The hotel complex originated from the upgrading of a preexisting hotel as the clients wanted to limit the impact on a delicate and unique monumental setting by using high-technology materials. The project redeveloped the site according to its specific features and to the customs and habits of the local traditions: pieces of furniture carved in tuff or made by local artisans; baths made from old water-collection tanks; the continuous flooring system adapted to the irregular shape of the rooms excavated in the limestone; and a microled lighting system that reminds one of the dim light of candles.

The project designed new spaces for guests like the *Lounge Terrace*, created inside a series of sloping-down grottos; the Gourmet Cuisine Centre, proposing tastings of typical products from Lucania; and the Wellness Centre, designed to cut energy and water consumptions by adopting low environmental-impact technologies that have been awarded the international certification Bio-Wellness.

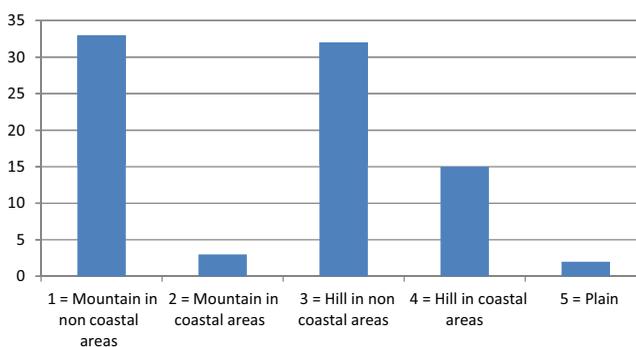


Figure 5.
Number of facilities listed on the National Association of Albergo Diffuso website per altimetric zone of the municipality where they are located

Source: Authors' processing of the figures on www.albergidiffusi.it/, 18 July 2016

Borgo del Benessere in Riccia

This project was about the creation of a scattered accommodation complex devoted to wellbeing and to the third age in the historical old town center of the municipality of Riccia (Campobasso), in the region of Molise[13].

This project tries to match the provision of healthcare services to people in need for rehabilitation and assistance services, with cultural and entertainment activities linked to the tradition and the natural features of the place. This project has, therefore, identified a specific target user, which is a group destined to grow over time. At present (Villani and Dall'Ara, 2015), only a small percentage of people over 70 (3.2 per cent) chooses an Albergo Diffuso.

The project is based on the model of the Albergo Diffuso and it sees the purchase, by the municipal administration, of nearly 15 dwellings to be restored and turned into residences (with maximum four bed places per dwelling) and to the common services (offices, reception, meeting rooms, wellness center, restaurant and a small cinema). Of course, these facilities may also host the guests' relatives and friends or other tourists interested in experiencing life in this village.

The facility management shall then be entrusted to private operators specialized in this business. The first five buildings were officially opened in March 2016.

The project was made possible by public funds; it also includes the upgrading of squares and public places for commercial and exhibition initiatives. Special attention will be devoted to environmental sustainability (zero-garbage project, a composting area for urban organic waste and energy efficiency interventions for street lighting).

This project aims at becoming a best practice in the upgrading and the recovery of old town centers.

The municipality of Riccia can be easily reached from the regions of central Italy and rises in a territory that has not been discovered by mass tourism yet. It may offer widespread quality in terms of landscape, history, architecture, food, wine and archeology.

It also envisages a wealth of activities for the guests of the village targeted at keeping the mind and the body active: gardening in gardens and orchards, walks along equipped paths, cultural events and training classes in collaboration with the University of the Third Age and attention to food.

Conclusions

The Albergo Diffuso can embody a different concept of tourism that is more careful about the local identity and traditions, an idea of tourism based on the value and the quality of the vacation experience.

The Albergo Diffuso also emerges as a tool able to upgrade a territory, its culture and the local traditions by means of a new concept of hospitality.

This organizational model is a sustainable tool to relaunch the economy in areas that are often depressed and characterized by a low entrepreneurial culture and scarce managerial skills. It favors local small entrepreneurship, craftsmanship, agriculture and the recovery of the local building stock.

It stimulates innovation of the hotel industry and of tourism, following logics that respect the historical and geographical features of the Italian territory. The villages and small towns of Italy are actually characterized by widespread wealth of the artistic, food, wine and landscape heritage that is often little known. The Albergo Diffuso is able to attract a sector of demanding and conscious tourists who ask for customized, non-standardized services.

To implement this model, some critical aspects must be solved: from architectural renovation and upgrade and the organization, promotion and management of the tourist –

hotel activity to the “integration and harmonization of the regulations” at a regional level (Villani and Dall’Ara, 2015).

In Italy, several political initiatives have been launched to make the most of the historical and landscape wealth of the territory and these can positively contribute to the further development of the Albergo Diffuso Model.

The most recent initiative has been the Italian government’s decision to call the year 2017 “Anno the Borghi” (year of the villages), with the aim of developing a promotional system coordinated among the Italian regions to increase their competitiveness in the world, promote the historical and environmental heritage and develop experience-based tourism. Within the framework of this initiative, the Albergo Diffuso is valued especially as a tool to relaunch the economy: “In line with the Tourism Strategic Plan, the upgrading of the small villages aims at offering a “slow-tourism” experience that is more sustainable and authentic, while being also far-away and complementary to the proposals linked to the universally known destinations in Italy” (MIBACT, 2017).

A second initiative promoted by the Italian Government is the project called “Progetto Valore Paese – Dimore” (Country Value Project – Residences), targeted at promoting the proposals of Italian culture and the competitiveness of the country through sustainable development. This initiative addresses the buildings of historical and artistic values managed by the State Property Agency (castles, old residences of noble families, abandoned historical facilities, unused convents, lighthouses and sea residences), which together make up the extraordinary cultural heritage of Italy. In line with the Italian “Piano strategico turismo 2020” (the Strategic Plan for Tourism in 2020) and in agreement with the EU planning for 2014-2020, the purpose of the project is “to develop and put at work publicly-owned properties (by the State and other public entities) for tourist accommodation that are of particular historic and artistic merit and located in sites of significance in terms of the environment and the landscape” [14]. The aim is also to create a showcase for made-in-Italy products, a tool that would promote and cast light on Italian culture and traditions from art to history, landscape to hand-made products and fashion to food and wine.

Notes

1. Albergo Diffuso www.albergodiffuso.com/ (accessed 10 June 2016).
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4. L’IDEA E LA STORIA, available at: www.albergodiffuso.com/l_idea.html (accessed 13 June 2016).
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6. Eurostat, available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/tourism/data/database> (accessed 20 July 2016).
7. ISTAT, Capacità degli esercizi ricettivi e Movimento dei clienti negli esercizi ricettivi: Tipo di esercizio disaggregato, <http://dati.istat.it/> (accessed 13 June 2016).
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