

sous la direction de
LAMIA HADDA
SAVERIO MECCA
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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**



PERMANENCE IN ABSENCE. PRESERVATION OF HISTORIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL HERITAGE OF VAL CERVO (PIEDMONT, ITALY)

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The medium-upper Val Cervo, in the province of Biella, in northern Piedmont (Italy), like many other pre-alpine and alpine valleys in the region, has experienced radical depopulation in recent decades. The decline of industrial activities has caused a strong depopulation, in a previously economically very active area. This part of the valley is composed of about forty small urbanized nuclei, characterized by solid constructions, thanks to the use of resistant materials and a consolidated building capacity of the local workers. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the valley has seen patrons and open-minded entrepreneurs operating here, who have set up a program of enhancement and also protection of environmental resources and implementation of infrastructure. Despite the abandonment, the good quality of buildings and the permanence and maintenance of an extensive infrastructure network allows the survival in good conditions of the built heritage and the context. This is possible not so much because the area has not been touched by mass tourism, but above all because a different way of using resources has been set up for decades. The prospects for a revival of the valley pass through the lesson of the past: the echoes of Ermengildo Zegna's "green thought" and Adriano Olivetti's "gentle capitalism" seem to have firmly established themselves in this area and made it resilient, and they still seem fundamental in perspective a revival not only economic in a slow and conscious tourism, but also in a deeper anthropological perspective.

Keywords: Abandoned villages, Depopulation, Mass tourism, Conservation

The Val Cervo (Fig. 1) is a historic crossroads of high-altitude connections between Piedmont and the Aosta Valley, reaffirmed and enriched in modern times by bold communication routes wanted and financed by two great local figures, senator Federico Rosazza and entrepreneur Ermengildo Zegna

The valley, about fifteen kilometres long, for centuries benefited from a flourishing economy based on sheep-farming and trade in the mountain part, extraction of syenite in the middle part, near Balma, and yarn processing, in particular wool, in the lower part, near Biella.

While the lower part of the valley, almost flat and close to the outskirts of Biella, has the characteristics of the urban centres of the plain and has suffered from a progressive industrialization and urbanization in the second half of the twentieth century, which has absorbed and in some cases erased the historical characters (except for some parts of the centre of Andorno

**Fig. 1**

The site.

**Fig. 2**

Ancient buildings
in Santa Maria
di Pedicloso
(Campiglia Cervo).

Micca), the middle and upper part of the valley, from Campiglia Cervo to Piedicavallo, has maintained and keeps intact its historical and environmental characters.

Here were born building contractors very active in the construction of new infrastructures immediately after the unification of Italy, throughout the country. Alongside specifically rural construction, there is no lack of episodes of great quality, such as the large residences built for their families by building contractors linked to the Savoys (above all Villa Magnani and Villa Biglia in San Paolo Cervo and Villa Piatti in Roreto).

Federico Rosazza Pistolet (1813-1899) owes the first part of his surname to the town in the middle Val Cervo, Rosazza, which gave him his birthplace, and where he died. He was a lawyer and politician. Like others of his fellow countrymen he dedicated himself, in the last decades of his life, to financing the construction of works and infrastructures useful for daily life and works in the valley. The road connection between the Sanctuary of San Giovanni, which rises upstream of Campiglia and Rosazza, and that of Oropa, in the adjacent valley, is perhaps his best known work. It includes, among other things, a daring tunnel, in the highest part of the route, dug with the help of the workers of the



entire valley. A Freemason and a lover of spiritualism, he also created the mule track to Gaby, always assisted and inspired by a fellow countryman, Giuseppe Maffei (1821-1901), a unique self-taught figure, artist and teacher¹.

The contemporaries Giovanni Pietro Magnani (1812-1893), known as “Magnanin”, and Giovanni Battista Biglia (1830-1908), who built the residences bearing their names in San Paolo Cervo, also financed the construction of bridges, roads, wash houses, fountains in the central part of the valley².

These well-deserving personalities of extraordinary industriousness and munificence remained to the end men of the nineteenth century. Ermenegildo (“Gildo”) Zegna (1892-1966), Count of Monterubello (title acquired in 1938), entrepreneur, founder of the homonymous textile company, a true international excellence, was instead a true innovator. He proved capable of deeply linking the productive presence to society, and of acting on territorial resources with a view to enhancing and preserving the common good.

¹ On the figure of Maffei see G. Valz Blin, Giuseppe Maffei 1821-1901. La vita e le opere nel centenario della morte, Eventi&progetto editore, Biella 2001.

² We refer to: C. Ghiraldello, Ricerche d’arte. Percorsi biellesi, Edizioni Gariazzo, Biella 2012.

**Fig. 3**

Ancient buildings
in Forgnengo
(Campiglia Cervo).

The family business was founded in Trivero, not far from Val Cervo, where Zegna, starting in 1932, had various infrastructures built, including a film theatre, a public library, a kindergarten, a gymnasium, the Zegna Care Centre with the maternity and children's clinic, and the Albergo San Bernardo, donated to the Province of Biella in 1972 and now the seat of a hotel school.

Above all he created the panoramic road that bears his name (Panoramica Zegna), which connects Trivero to Val Cervo, near Valsesia, and which should have continued to the adjacent Aosta Valley. The Panoramica Zegna is not only a road, but is an infrastructure firmly linked to the context and landscape of the mountains of Trivero and Val Cervo. Zegna, according to what was called his "green thinking", imagined it to be at the center of a mountain tourism project that would guarantee not only access for all to places of extraordinary beauty, but above all their enhancement and protection. The road was started in 1938, according to the project of the engineer Silvio Grupallo of Biella. In 1939 Poggio Caulera was reached at an altitude of one thousand meters. In 1947 it reached the Bocchetta di Stavella, where a bowling alley with sixty-four fields was built. In Margosio

**Fig. 4**

Community
glacier and
ancient buildings
in Piedicavallo.



**Fig. 6**

Buildings in ruins (mountain pastures near Rosazza).



was built the alpine colony “Monte Rubello”, summer receptive structure for the children of the workers of the Biella industries.

In the fifties the highest altitude of the route was reached, where the Bielmonte accommodation and tourist facilities were built. In February 1977 it finally reached the bottom of Val Cervo, near Valmosca, and the branch for Oropa realized by Rosazza between 1889 and 1898, with the characteristic tunnel. The Panoramica Zegna extends today for 64 km. Between Trivero and Val Cervo Zegna, he had about half a million conifers planted an uncountable quantity of flowering plants, mainly rhododendrons (the so-called “Conca dei rododendri” is famous), azaleas and hydrangeas.

Since 1993 the whole area is a naturalistic area, called Oasi Zegna, managed by FondazioneZegna in collaboration with Alp Action - The International Corporate Fund for the Environment (FAI) and other bodies.

The work of Ermengildo Zegna in a perspective of specialization (and respect) of the territory is not different from that which was experimented in Valle d'Aosta with the Plan of 1936-37, at the impulse of Adriano Olivetti (from Ivrea, not far from Val Cervo), another important protagonist of the conversion of industrial profit to the benefit of the community³. Olivetti and Zegna were both interpreters of a vision of “gentle capitalism”

³ His territorial experiences are effectively summarized in P. Gabellini, I luoghi dell'urbanistica e dell'architettura di Adriano Olivetti, in Adriano Olivetti l'urbanistica, l'architettura, l'INU, atti del convegno (Perugia, 5 dicembre 2014), Roma 2015, pp. 38-45.

aimed at bringing back to the territory part of the economic resources deriving from an industrial activity aimed not only at the local market but also at the world market, for the benefit of the community. Although Zegna lacked Olivetti's political vision, the ability to make his environmental protection actions a method, Zegna's work was aimed at improving working conditions and the quality of life in the community through welfare works and the provision of infrastructure and leisure areas. Olivetti's aim was to create real "concrete communities" (it could be translated as "active and effective communities"), characterized by participatory programming⁴.

In any case, the works carried out in the upper and middle Val Cervo by the patronage of the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century are of great construction quality, which drew on a consolidated technical knowledge, more engineering than architectural, more prone to *firmitas* than *venustas* (Figg. 2,3,4,5). Character that seems to permeate moreover great part of the building of the whole valley, with such a continuity in the time that the dating of the buildings or part of them on a stylistic and/or constructive basis is practically impossible.

The building heritage of the valley, although of ancient origin, is characterized by the use of local stone material in large squared ashlar and chestnut (or beech) wood for the horizons and roofs. The pushing structures (vaults and arches), relegated to the basement or to the second floor above ground, are almost totally missing. The building types are simple, with elementary wall boxes, preferably developed in height, up to three or four, or even five floors above ground. The oldest scheme is the one common to most of the prealpine and alpine building, with rooms for the ground and second floor (or warehouses, in case of articulated structures), above which, on one or two levels, there are the rooms for the storage of wood and hay, generally open on the main front, which is usually exposed to the south. There are also influences of the Walser culture, limited to the upper valley, most likely borrowed from the communities of the adjacent Gressoney valley. However, there is no evidence, not even in the past, of Walser linguistic strains in Val Cervo, although there is no lack of Germanic assonance in the local dialect. The nineteenth-century buildings in the major centers of the valley also consist of multi-family buildings for the families of quarry workers. These are mostly buildings of even conspicuous size, on three or four floors, with different housing units on each floor. The complexes at high altitude, at the mountain pastures, present instead an extreme simplicity, as they are seasonal settlements (and are the ones that have suffered

⁴V. Ochetto, *Attualità di Adriano Olivetti. Cenni biografici con interrogativi*, in Adriano Olivetti. L'impresa, la comunità, il territorio, atti del convegno (Roma, 21 novembre 2014), Fondazione Adriano Olivetti, Roma 2015, pp. 18-27, citazione da p. 20.

**Fig. 7**

Modern bridge collapsed during the flood of October 6, 2020.

the most consequences due to abandonment, given the extreme environmental conditions and the distance from towns and villages – Fig. 6). Many are the buildings left with the facing at sight, especially in rural areas, while in the inhabited centers there is a certain predominance of the use of plaster, both with rustic and smoothed finish. In the oldest buildings there are still traces of pictorial decorations in imitation of nobler finishes (ashlar, architectural elements), with a marked polychromy. The dates engraved in the stone abound on the portals, which are generally very simple, trilithic, without decorations. Everywhere there are testimonies of popular devotion, in the form of sacred images painted on plaster. There is also an abundance of secular painted representations, referring to the Piedmontese characters of the commedia dell'arte. Sundials are also quite common. All these traces are affected by the lack of maintenance, which followed the depopulation. Many have been better preserved, but only as “paintings” inside completely renovated plasters.

Even if Val Cervo is very close to the provincial capital and the good infrastructure network, the whole valley has been heavily affected by the crisis of the main productive sectors (sheep-farming, extraction of syenite and yarn processing) of the last decades, which

has seen the disappearance, with very few exceptions, of manufacturing activities in the textile sector that were the driving part of the local economy. The progressive devastating crisis has led to the depopulation of the approximately forty or so villages in the upper and middle part of the valley (-90%, from 7,000 to 700 inhabitants). The inhabitants of the municipalities in the lower part of the valley have instead continued to live on the site but have had to find new jobs in the nearby Biella.

Almost all the settlements, despite the deep demographic and economic crisis that has hit the valley in recent decades and the almost total absence of residents in almost all the lower part of the valley, benefit from an enviable solidity due to the quality and resistance of the materials used and the undoubtedly expertise of the builders. Also the context maintains intact its character and intrinsic beauty, thanks also to the extensive care interventions carried out on the capillary network of trails and mountain paths by the three municipalities of the upper-middle valley and the mountain communities.

The built heritage resisted, among other things, the 2002 flood and the even more disastrous flood of October 6 of 2020. In particular the infrastructures built by Rosazza Pistolet, Magnani, Biglia and Zegna have resisted, while the most recent works have been literally crumbled by the floods of the torrents (at Piedicavallo five of the six bridges were destroyed or heavily damaged, at Rosazza one bridge was completely destroyed, while a section of the main modern road of the valley, near Malpensà di Campiglia, was swallowed up by the Cervo). The damages of one day, attested also in this paper by one dramatic photographic image (Fig. 7), will require huge works, and works for many years.

In addition to the good behavior of the structures built in the face of abandonment (but until when?) and a good preservation of the environmental characters, Val Cervo is also distinguished by another peculiarity: compared to many other parts of northern Italy, which have a proximity to large urban centres (just over an hour's drive from Milan and Turin) the valley has not seen the proliferation of holiday homes, there have been no new buildings. There is an almost total lack of mass tourist attractions (sports facilities, great hospitality buildings) or other elements of attraction.

It would therefore seem to be possible to say that the reason for the preservation of the characteristics of the Val Cervo territory is due to the absence of mass tourism. But it can be demonstrated that it is rather a consequence of a different type of tourism and local life, and of the organization of the context.

The traditional shrewd use of resources, heritage of this and other mountain social groups, has been confirmed and in some way validated, and increased, by the way in which innovations have been introduced even of great territorial impact. In other places in the country, the

construction of infrastructure and tourist facilities has had and continues to have devastating effects. There is an almost complete replacement of the social structure, a mostly seasonal use of the settlements, a proliferation of modern buildings that prevail over traditional ones, often subject to overwhelming restructuring. The more peripheral nuclei, difficult to reach, succumb to this disparity of fruition, which distinguishes between attractive and easily reachable places and places perhaps of greater charm but without the offers usually proposed to mass tourism. In Val Cervo this disparity does not exist.

We can think, but it is in fact demonstrable, that the nineteenth-century entrepreneurial patronage, even with its paternalistic connotations, the “green thought” of an Ermengildo Zegna, as well as the echoes, not too far away, of the “gentle capitalism” of an Adriano Olivetti and his ideas of participation, have built a strong identity in these places, such as to resist the trivial as well as aggressive update that has affected many other places of quality.

The abandonment, which elsewhere has devastating repercussions, from which it is impossible to go back, here is configured as a suspension. A sort of state of waiting. The sap that allows this continuity of potential vitality, in the absence of intervention by individual owners, should be seen in the action of the community in keeping alive the network of routes, connections, triggering a slow tourism, certainly marginal in numbers, but also useful to guard the territory.

Obviously it is necessary to question the evolution of this state of affairs. Apparently the abandonment of these places there is no remedy, as it is unthinkable to re-establish an economic autonomy such as to ensure a stable repopulation and reconstruction of old communities. Nor does the option of a *sic et simpliciter* enhancement of the human presence in a context of only holiday homes appear acceptable. Other hypotheses, partly already experimented (diffuse museum) are providing secondary results. Unfortunately, unlike what happens in other Italian Alpine areas and neighbouring countries, the possibility to create or reactivate a network of connections with the adjacent Alpine valleys is hardly feasible, even if historically attested: the Sessera valley, in the north-east, is practically isolated and is only served, in the upper part, by the Panoramica Zegna; the Sesia valley, with the tourist and sports area of Alagna and Monte Rosa, is too far away; the connection with the adjacent Lys valley, where Gressoney is located, is only possible on inaccessible slopes and mule tracks that require long travel times, and only up to Gaby. The connection with the valley of Oropa, where the famous Sanctuary is located, is also possible only thanks to the road built by Rosazza with curves and gradients calibrated to the way of moving by mule rather than to the needs of modern vehicular traffic.

However, it seems in any case the strengthening, the care and the valorization of the already present infrastructural network, of which history and reasons have been briefly outlined, the first resources to oppose the abandonment. At the same time, a work of implementation of the knowledge of the settlement system of the valley must be started, which passes through a census of the buildings, their study, the formation of a cognitive atlas useful to delineate their identity. Also in order to avoid the always possible dissolution due to upsetting interventions of "recovery". The pivots on which these activities can rotate are some consolidated presences such as the Bürsch (mountain community) and the religious center of the sanctuary of St. John, with the great Hospice. And, of course, the environment, which has in the Zegna Oasis a consolidated and well-known presence in a transregional area. A last significant aspect to take into consideration is also the construction of a communicative profile of Val Cervo and its presentation and diffusion. Also in this case the example to be followed is that of FondazioneZegna, and the signs of identity of the valley, which are environmental and cultural signs. Think for example of the symbolism of the heraldic coats of arms of the municipalities of the valley, which see present the bear, as in that of Biella and the province of Biella. Bear that also recurs in popular traditions, for example in the game boards engraved on stone seats of Forgnengo, one of which proposes an atavistic recurred between bear and three hunters. The challenge to abandonment, the approach to an identity that seems to be neglected, but which runs "under-the-radar", is obviously played first of all on the anthropological level and on the ability to explain and share its contents.

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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.

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