

'Territori in Circolo': Architectural Praxis for the Survival of Rural Communities in the Italian Mezzogiorno

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The Italian Mezzogiorno and particularly Calabria looks like a 'green desert' where the environmental degradation proceeds with the marginalisation of many small communities, whose survival is at risk. Santa Caterina dello Ionio, 450 meters above the Ionian Sea is among the most valuable settlements founded in the Middle Age on the Gulf of Squillace, a particular model of defended enclosure fully combined with the site, rich in cultural and environmental values.

The project 'Territori in Circolo', promoted by the association Pheozemia with the local parish, aims to engage the neighbourhood in discovering the relationship between natural resources, urban forms and community life, on this Mediterranean edge of Europe. The project concerns a territory of 2.000 residents, whose profile, stretching from the mountain to the coastline, presents a significant cross-section of this extreme part of the peninsula. The idea of linking different objects and places along this section of Ionian Calabria finally aims to introduce advanced actors and shapes in a declining rural area of the Italian Mezzogiorno.

Rural Italy and the Marginal Urbanities

If we take into consideration the problem of the abandon of rural areas as a central issue in spatial planning, the case of the Italian Mezzogiorno comes out as particularly relevant, since it is mainly composed of rural territories whose strategic importance has not been properly recognized. In Italy, out of 30 millions hectares of land, 23 millions hectares are made up of hillsides and mountains, forming the 76% of the whole national territory. In the Mezzogiorno¹ this percentage is 80%, while in Calabria is 90%. In the North it goes down to 70%. It should also be observed that in large part, these rural territories coincide with municipalities, of less than 5 thousand residents. These small municipalities are 5780 in Italy, out of 8101, and make up 72% of the whole. While they represent only 19% of the population of Italy, their territorial surface makes up 55% of the national territory.

In the last sixty years, these rural areas have suffered a considerable abandon in economic production and social cohesion in spite of significant external economic flows: a certain expenditure from the state and immigrant remittances from Europe and overseas. The result of this draining process is not difficult to sketch out: the rural territories of Italian Mezzogiorno begin to look like an extended 'green desert', mostly made up of degraded woods, idle arable lands, wild pastures and abandoned fields. Here and there, a myriad of small historical settlements lay high above emerging rocks, stuck between the countless valleys of the Appennino, the great backbone that goes uninterrupted along the Italian peninsula. These settlements, ranging from 1.000 to 3.000 inhabitants, are generally linked to the main coastal corridors through transversal provincial roads that, even if structured with suitable road beds, nonetheless present steeply

¹ The Italian Mezzogiorno comprises in a strict sense, the six southern regions of the peninsula: Campania, Abruzzo, Molise, Basilicata, Puglia and Calabria, in a wider sense it also includes the major isles of Sicilia and Sardegna.



Fig. 1. The village of Santa Caterina dello Ionio. Photo: M. Condo'

sloping courses due to the gradient of the coastal hills.

It is obvious that in the current economic phase, characterized by ever higher levels of exchange in resources, goods and services, the presence of these physical thresholds affects in many aspects the urban functionality, from the efficiency of logistic services – that strongly influences the retail market in the small villages – to the profitability and convenience of the local transport services. In the course of these last decades, on top of these basic weaknesses, further reductions came with regards to the public services, with a particular effect on the historical hilltowns. To the obsolescence of many grid-infrastructures such as water systems and the lack of a general fuel gas pipe in many of these centres, has been added the discomfort produced by some legislative measures recently introduced by the Italian government to control the public finances.²

² Some of these norms directly affect the small centres, with special regard to primary education, such as the standard recently introduced providing for the shut-down of the primary schools that do not have fifty children. This measure has been greeted in many rural villages of Calabria with pacific demonstrations, for example with the request by the senior citizens for admission in the primary school - as the number of their grandchildren is not sufficient to maintain a service that is also a civil right guaranteed by the Republican Constitution. This protest has underlined how the protection of the primary school is decisive to the social cohesion and the survival of these historical villages, beyond the stiff parameters of a finance act.

A Slice of Ionian Versant: Santa Caterina dello Ionio

So let us give our attention to Calabria, where the territorial unbalance reaches an exemplary dimension and character, with a very high number of historical hill-towns facing abandon if not already deserted, in contrast to all the recent urbanization, concentrated on the coastal ribbon. This configuration comes out in a paradigmatic shape on the Ionian side of Calabria, namely on the Gulf of Squillace. This area, between the 9th and 10th century A.D., experienced flourishing urban settlements, a dispersed net of small urbanities, regularly castled, to form a shielding line of communication from the pirate-like incursions that regularly affected the Central Mediterranean from the early Middle Age to the beginning of the Modern Era.



Fig. 2. Santa Caterina and the Gulf of Squillace on the Ionian side of Calabria. Image: M. Condo', D. Vadala'

The historical settlement of Santa Caterina dello Ionio overlooks the Gulf of Squillace at its southern end, not far from Cape Stilo, in an approximately barycentric position between the ancient foundations of Crotona and Locri. The modern municipal borders, shaped like a lengthened isosceles triangle, go over the historical feudal tenure of Santa Caterina, defining a significant section of the extremity of the Italian peninsula which includes at relatively short intervals, very different geomorphological, natural and anthropical settings, following one after the other. Twenty minutes drive along the provincial road is enough to reach the historical centre of Santa Caterina, 480 metres a.s.l., while it is half an hour drive from the coast to the mountain village of Elce della Vecchia at 1.100 metres a.s.l. When observing now the administrative division of the small municipalities facing the Gulf we see a typical layout where the municipal limits are arranged transversely to the coastline.

In each of these territories, a dual urban scheme can be normally identified:

1. A medieval hill-town, generally on a rocky relief emerging from the coastal hills, at a height between 200 and 500 metres,
2. A linear coastal settlement, developed in the second half of the 20th century along the national road and the railway.

Even if the administrative boundaries suggest the territorial integration from the coastal ribbon towards the hills, facts show exactly the contrary: an effective integration within this dual scheme does not exist and the distance perceptible among the coastal settlement and the hill-town is much more than the real distance.



Fig. 3. Administrative boundaries of Santa Caterina and altimetry of the territory. Image: M. Condo', D. Vadala'



Fig. 4. Medieval lane in the historic village. Photo: D. Vadala'



Fig. 5. Mountain village in the upper part of the territory of Santa Caterina. Photo: D. Vadala'

The Role of the 'Open Assets'

The project 'Territories in Circle' comes from these assumptions trying to give a contribution to a fundamental question: how a small, once rural, community on the Mediterranean edge of Europe can play a role in the XXI century's urban society. In an economic framework, which is substantially different from the pre-industrial era, an answer to this question could come from the estimation and utilisation of local resources now largely unexploited. The places of the project are composed of edifices



Fig. 6. 20th century's coastal settlement along the national road.
Photo: D. Vadala'

and properties that can be defined open assets. With this expression we mean objects and places that, for their legal status, but especially due to their intrinsic quality have had a distinctive role within an urban community and continue to have a particular public value. These assets are often in a serious state of abandon, even if there is still interest shown in them, due to a popularity linked to the memory of outstanding community events: bridal feasts, religious ceremonies, the olive crop and harvest time. In the Italian Mezzogiorno a considerable part of these assets belongs to the Catholic Church and represent a very important



Fig. 7. Survey in the Canonical House of S. Pantaleo and the survey in the 'Circolo Cattolico' (Church of Annunziata).
Photo: D. Vadala', M. Condo'



Fig. 8. Survey in the Canonical House of S. Pantaleo and the survey in the 'Circolo Cattolico' (Church of Annunziata).
Photo: D. Vadala', M. Condo'



Fig. 9. Rooftscape of Santa Caterina from the Canonical House.
Photo: D. Vadala'

resource not only from a purely economic aspect, but especially from a social aspect, particularly in the historical centres facing abandon.

These assets were frequently given to the parish church by affluent private donors and sometimes by ordinary people for the benefit of the entire community and particularly for the poor. In the past, these properties could also be generically left for the benefit of the people; therefore at the opening of an holograph will, a problem could arise on who those properties should be assigned to, so if the will should be intended as an



Fig. 10. Survey in the unfarmed field of Maneda. Photo: D. Vadala'



Fig. 11. Distribution of the open assets in the territory of Santa Caterina. Image: M. Condo', D. Vadala'



Fig. 12/13. Open assets: the 'Circolo Cattolico' (Church of Annunziata) and the Canonical House. Photo: M. Condo', D. Vadala'



Fig. 14/15. Open assets: the Canonical House. Photo: D. Vadala'

³ Anecdote told by a local notary.

endowment to the Municipality or to the Parish.³ After the emptying of the historical centres in the second half of the 20th century, the primary function of much of these assets has gradually vanished and their future is today rather undetermined. If in the past they had actually contributed to the needs of the poor and the maintenance of the parish priests, today these are for the most part, ruined buildings and properties let to private citizens, but often completely uncultivated. In Autumn 2006, the young parish priest, recently appointed to Santa Caterina, asked the volunteers of the association 'Pheozemia' to help him verify the state of



Fig. 16. Open assets: the unfarmed field of Maneda. Photo: D. Vadala'

some buildings and lands held by the Catholic Church in different places of the parish. The survey led to the location of a sequence of edifices which had been abandoned in the late Sixties and of lands which are let out at a very low price to private tenants who hope to get hold of these properties through a sort of pre-emption right in the future. It emerged, with this reconnaissance that some of the ecclesial tenures in the territory of Santa Caterina were particularly relevant for their landscape, cultural and ethno-anthropological values as well as being positioned in different environments: the historical centre, the coastal hills, the woods at the foot of the mountain ridge of the *Serre Calabresi*.

The 'Circolo Cattolico', former Church of the Annunziata and seat of the same brotherhood, whose origins dates back to the 16th century, a period rich in ecclesial buildings promoted by lay organisations that in Calabria had particular importance in the care of the sick people. This edifice, of great artistic value, was shut down in the 1950's as a place of worship and used till the early 1980's to host the circle of the lay organisation 'Azione Cattolica'. Due to its position close to the main church of Santa Maria Assunta, this one aisle edifice was also used as a parish hall for get-togethers that traditionally came after weddings.

This much-loved place by the community lays now completely abandoned and due to its value, both intrinsic and instrumental, risks being purchased by private entrepreneurs and definitively removed from the public use

The Canonical House of San Pantaleon, formerly the second parish in Santa Caterina then closed down after the demographic shortage of the historical centre. It was considered a particularly 'rich' parish, holding a forestal property at the foot of the Serre, in the upper part of the land of Santa Caterina that produced chestnuts, acorns for the pig-breeding, legumes and potatoes for the benefit of the local clerics and



Fig. 17. Open assets: the woodland of San Pantaleo. Photo: D. Vadala'

the numerous families who had been working there. The parish house, next to the church of San Pantaleone, does not have special artistic value, lacking that monumental character which distinguishes an edifice of particular importance from ordinary buildings; nonetheless it displays the technological and functional character of popular architecture, being located at the centre of that part of the town which was the most intensively populated and once occupied by olive presses and mills. The internal distribution of this tiny edifice offers a complex domestic section with a specific historical-anthropological value. Due to the wealth of the parish of San Pantaleone, the canonical house was divided in a great number of small rooms, with a particular intermediate floor, which could be entered through a small trap door and used as a warehouse for agricultural products.

An unfarmed piece of land of about 5 hectares, placed in a countryside popularly known as Maneda. This area, rather distant from the coast, has the form of a deep depression against a fairly high relief in the coastal hills belt, an area noticeably characterized by particularly fertile clay soils, appropriate for a variety of cultivation (olive trees, grapes, fruit trees, wheat). These soils, formed by the alluvial deposits of the Pliocene, sometimes emerge from the coastal landscape in the typical form of the calanques.

A woodland area of 16 hectares, situated in the upper part of the territory of Santa Caterina, at the foot of the Serre Calabresi, a few kilometers from the historical centres of Brognaturo and Serra San Bruno. This plot of forestal land of great environmental value, once pertaining to the parish of San Pantaleone, was endowed, in the 1950's of two edifices to support agricultural production and to host the tenants. These edifices, built thanks to a fund from the Italian government, are now completely abandoned and in ruins.

The idea of recovering these assets for the benefit of the entire community gradually came up. As the Church had once been endowed with these assets with the specific purpose of helping the poor in the community, now the public use of these properties, in a completely different socio-economic setting, would have been advisable and consistent with the will expressed by the donors.

Even more the necessity arose of amplifying the value of these assets in the frame of a far-reaching collaborative project and try to open up this community which is now strongly conditioned by economic, social and environmental emergencies and cut off from any kind of scientific and cultural relation, notwithstanding deep anthropological connections with its own territory.

'Territori in Circolo'

In this particular context, the parish church, spiritual guide of the community, could not fail to extend this responsibility to the care for the built environment and its significant places, becoming an agent of



Fig. 18. 'Territori in Circolo': distribution of the activities.
Image: M. Condo', D. Vadala'

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local development, too. In this effort the parish met the assistance of Pheozemia,⁴ a social promotion association based in Santa Caterina whose aim is the *promotion of urban and environmental renewal as an appropriate approach for the enhancement of local identities*.

The association founded in 2008 by a group of researchers in the field of architecture and natural sciences, is interested in experimenting sustainable approaches to the modification and management of the built environment, particularly in those areas which are at risk of economic, social and cultural marginalisation such as rural areas, urban-rural fringe zones, degraded urban neighbourhoods. In this regard the role of Pheozemia and the partnership with the Catholic Church is of particular interest, as this relationship is intended to bring into being a kind of innovative social action rarely experienced in the Italian Mezzogiorno. Not seldom in Italy, in marginal contexts suffering from lack of social services, the Catholic Church plays an important role, replacing public local authorities which are often distant or ineffective. Still, in a declining rural area, it makes no sense to try to provide static social aids to an ageing population, it is rather important to give basic tools for a creative intervention on the built environment making of it an instrument of economic and cultural development.

The joint effort of the parish 'Santa Maria Assunta' and the association Pheozemia, meet the experience of the training centre 'Europa 2010', based in Rome and interested in the environmental management and the mitigation of the intercultural conflicts with a special regard to the Mediterranean area. The subjects promoting the project so recognize how the general development of the community and the growth of the human being are linked to the quality of the physical setting, intended as a whole of built-up and natural environment.

On that basis, on April 2008, they have agreed to start a co-ordinated programme of activities around the theme of the safeguarding and care of the world, where the built and natural environment, rather than being seen as something abstract and distant, is recognized as a primary source of knowledge, experimentation and construction of the community. The idea of recovering the community's open assets in the frame of this wider cooperation programme showed some tricky elements for its implementation, colliding above all with the present-day ownership of a part of these properties, namely those terrains and rural edifices situated outside the historical centre.

It must be said that the property rights on those assets originally given to the Parish, have been transferred in 1984, to the Institute for the Sustenance of the Clergy of the Italian Catholic Church and actually subtracted from the full possession and use by the local Parish. Nonetheless, it was decided to override the problem starting a negotiation with the ISC in order to prepare a model of usufruct for these properties, whose involvement concerns the second stage of the project.

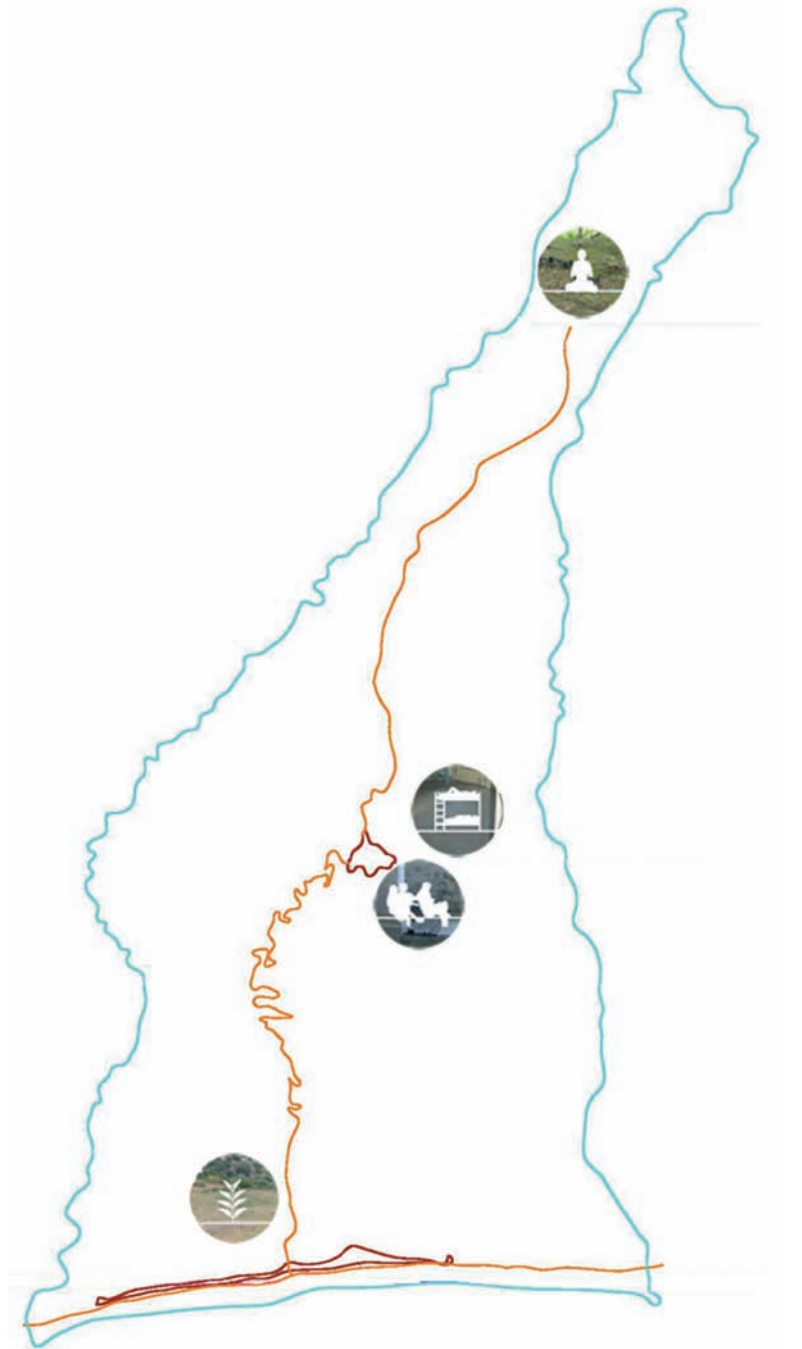


Fig. 19. 'Territori in Circolo': general plan.
Image: M. Condo', D. Vadala'



Fig. 20/21. The place of Conference Hal and the place of Guest House.
Concept Image: M. Condo'

At the end of 2008 a preliminary program was finally arranged, foreseeing the involvement of a set of complementary objects and properties - in different stages and with different modalities - in the framework of a cooperation programme of scientific and environmental research, in order *to experiment original approaches for the regeneration and sustainable management of the rural territories.*

The program 'TERRITORI IN CIRCOLO: Read the Environment to Build Communities' foresees at one go activities of scientific and cultural co-operation concerning three main areas:

1. Urban regeneration between natural and built environment
2. Rural territories as open assets: models of sustainable management
3. Human spirituality and the Environment: the sense of places

A significant broadening of the partnership is necessary to support these activities, with a group of seven organisations among partners and patrons which are ready to support the programme:

- Pheozemia Association of Social Promotion - Santa Caterina dell' Ionio
- Europa 2010 Education and Training Centre - Rome
- Pontifical Faculty San Bonaventura Seraphicum - Rome
- University of Messina
- State Forestry Corps
- Municipality of Santa Caterina dello Ionio

The open scheme of the programme enables other organisations - such as universities, enterprises, non profit organisations - to join the programme



Fig. 22/23. The place of Experimental Garden and the place of Meditation. Concept Image: M. Condo'

and add further elements and contribute to the improvement of the project. However, we can already define how the canonical properties and the different places will be introduced in the framework of the project and used to the benefit of the entire community.

Project implementation

In the first stage of the project, some basic maintenance and restoration work is to start for the complete use of two complementary edifices whose revitalization is aimed at the creation in the historical centre of Santa Caterina of an operations base for all the activities in the project:

1. **The Catholic Circle**, once refurbished, will be used as a small auditorium or conference hall for temporary exhibitions, thus enhancing the cultural life of the community. It will also be the showcase of the project 'Territori in Circolo' where the results of the research activity are displayed and shared with everybody.
2. **The former canonical house of San Pantaleone**, transformed in an independent guest house for cultural tourism, will also host the participants in the programme during the teaching courses and the training activities.

The second stage of the project is meant to 'put in a circle' the terrains owned by the parish in different places of Santa Caterina, in order to make them the core of the educational activities foreseen in the project which, in this second stage, is meant to spread from the historical centre to the surrounding territory.

3. **The field in 'Maneda'** will be used as a botanical garden to study vegetal crop response to increasing temperature associated

with climate change and desertification and for starting experimental productions.

4. **The wood in 'San Pantaleone'** will host specific educational and research activities for the protection of the wildlife and the woodland environment. The final stage of the project foresees the complete restoration of the masonry buildings and their purpose as a guest house for periods of retreat, meditation and scientific research.

The project 'Territori in Circolo' aims to propose a pragmatic approach to the survival of the rural communities, in a vision of targeting local development, for the most part doing without ordinary external support: the hypothesis is that not only the places of the project, but the human resources too, necessary to run the project, have to be found in the territory and specifically trained for this purpose.

This community-oriented praxis of strategic planning lays on three specific objectives:

5. **Increasing the integration among different aspects** in the territory of Santa Caterina: the coastal area, the historical centre with its surroundings, the woodland.
6. **Creating chances for new incomes through economic activity** in the field of higher education, environmental management and cultural tourism.
7. **Promoting the interaction of the local community** with a cluster of external players, promoters and beneficiaries, that will be involved in the course of the programme.

The cost estimated in 2008 for the entire project is about 315.000 euros, including the start of the first cycle of the educational and research programme. The main partners are not able to present this sum, so asking for sponsorships is the only feasible way, soliciting subjects interested in supporting with their brand a project of creative environmental renewal. At the same time, a complete and unconditioned use of all the areas is necessary in order to start the programme, so an agreement has to be drawn between the partnership and the Institute for the Sustenance of the Clergy, which now holds the rights on the properties where the activities will take place. This land was rented at very low price to private tenants who do not really use it, but simply renew the contract in order to try one day or another to get hold on these. At the moment a negotiation has started in order to solve all these problems, including the question of the rights possibly acquired by the tenants.

In the meantime a preliminary work has been undertaken aimed at the promotion of the project with the local community and training of the human resources that will be involved in the direction of the project. The parish has provided for such purpose some spacious meeting rooms within the former parish nursery school and three different workshop activities have been started in October 2009 concerning scenography, landscape photography and performing arts. At the moment, this

preliminary work is implemented without any funding sources other than the unpaid voluntary work of the experts involved and the small contributions from the young participants in the workshop activities.

This step-by-step practical approach is meant to wake up resources now latent in this territory, especially human resources, that in the future will give stability to the project. It is the only realistic way to start introducing both advanced actors and contemporary urban shapes in this peripheral area of Italy, suspended between the centre and the periphery of the world, on the Mediterranean edge of Europe.

