

A Manifesto for Re-Inhabiting Inner Areas

Twelve Starting Points to Imagine the Recovery, Re-Use, and Re-Activation of Buildings and Urban Spaces in the Appennino Basso Pesarese–Anconetano

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Abstract

This contribution presents the Manifesto for RESETting APPennines, developed as part of a doctoral thesis, with the aim of using the knowledge acquired during the research and transfer it in a clear and replicable way to the territory, in order to promote sustainable interventions on the existing built heritage in the inner areas, which are the focus of the study. The Manifesto is intended as a starting (or re-starting) point—built on a solid trans-scalar and multidisciplinary exploratory path—that intertwines strategies and actions for territorial promotion, cultural heritage valorization, and transformation of the living space, for a resilient rebirth of the inner areas. Rather than serving as a regulatory document, it offers a flexible tool to support re-inhabiting these territories by proposing a completely new way of interpreting and reusing the existing heritage. Based on four main statements that emerged from the research, the Manifesto emphasizes the importance of architectural design in the processes of recovering and reusing abandoned or underused architectural spaces. It outlines, in twelve points, a set of guidelines or intervention strategies for re-inhabiting fragile and marginal contexts—rich in historical heritage—like those of the inner areas, through the re-activation of what have been defined as “potential spaces.” In the Manifesto, adaptive reuse is not proposed as a mere response to a period of crisis, but as a responsible attitude and a design strategy through which to experiment with cultural, productive, social, and energy innovations. The document thus offers a framework for future projects capable of combining the historical memory of sites with the transformation required by regeneration, while fostering shared visions that address local needs and create lasting, vibrant communities.

Keywords: Inner Areas, Adaptive Reuse, Re-Inhabiting

Introduction

The Manifesto for RESETting APPennines, is one of the results of a PhD thesis¹, that has been funded by a PON grant, which, for this reason, has a predefined structure and topics: the research should focus on an area belonging to the ones defined by the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) (Barca et al. 2014), in this case, the Appennino Basso Pesarese–Anconetano (ABPA), and a period of the research had to be carried out in a local administration to develop co-design activities. Therefore, part of my research has been conducted at the municipality of Cagli. The PON project aims to have tangible impacts

on the context of the involved inner areas and it encourages technology transfer and an interdisciplinary approach weaving together different scales, tools, topics, and actors. Through four methodological phases, the research identifies new intervention methods to enhance heritage and living spaces to revitalize the inner areas. In particular, the research work has developed design ideas for the re-activation of abandoned or underused spaces within a strategic territorial framework. The results achieved throughout the different stages have been collected in a Manifesto, the final result of the research thesis.

The Context: the Inner Areas

To better understand the context of the study, it is important to define what SNAI is: an innovative national policy of territorial development that aims to fight the marginalization and phenomena of demographic decline characterizing inner areas in Italy. In particular, the ABPA, focus of the research, has been defined as the Marche Region's pilot area for the SNAI and includes nine rural-mountain municipalities. This territory, between Urbino and Fabriano, is characterised by a richness of built heritage, made up of a constellation of medieval villages and small settlements, in a landscape of unique natural and cultural value. Despite this asset, the ABPA shows marginalisation due to structural aspects and an increasing depopulation and a clear process of migration (with a total decrease in residents of 9.3% between 2010 and 2019) and a consequent abandonment of the built heritage. Phenomena that reflect the fragility of the area, characterised by administrative fragmentation, economic stagnation, poor transportation connections and unequal access to services such as limited educational opportunities, long distances to hospitals and housing and socio-economic problems also caused by the earthquakes in central Italy in 2016-17 and by the dramatic floods of September 2022.

As a pilot area in the Marche region for the SNAI, the ABPA has developed and implemented an innovative concept of artist residencies called *Asili d'Appennino*. These "Creativity Homes" in the nine municipalities are designed to re-activate significant buildings within the local heritage. The project aims to create a network of cultural hubs that are widespread, organized, and integrated across the inner territories, forming a system of meeting and hospitality spaces. The creation of welcoming environments for both residents and visitors has been achieved through the recovery of existing built heritage and through collaboration between the public and private sectors, leveraging skills and networks to enhance local knowledge, productive excellence, and innovative capacity.

Research's Process and Method

RESETting APPennines aims to develop and validate methods for the transformation and regeneration of urban and architectural spaces in inner areas. To achieve this goal, the research adopts an innovative, trans-scalar, and interdisciplinary approach that integrates tools, methods, and disciplinary fields that are usually treated separately. By interpreting inner areas as dynamic systems of opportunities, it combines territorial analysis, the application of ICTs, dialogue with local administrations and communities, and the study of best practices, exploring how iterative design methods can foster the adaptive reuse of built heritage, promote territorial valorisation, and stimulate new local economies.

Within this methodological framework, RESETting APPennines develops strategies that network municipalities through co-thinking and co-design processes, combining the research

by design method with the use of ICTs and 3D Data, considered not only as tools for architectural design but also as catalysts for participatory processes (Ferretti et al. 2022, 187–196). In this context, design acts as both a cognitive and operative instrument, enabling the development of clear, replicable, and context-sensitive design strategies grounded in a continuous process of analysis, interpretation, and experimentation. In particular, the heritage of the focus area's nine municipalities, linked to production, infrastructure, settlements and nature, has been mapped and systemised, in order to identify its values and risks, vulnerabilities and vibrancy (Barreca et al. 2020). The qualitative and quantitative collection of information revealed that most of the heritage is linked to production, given the agricultural and manufacturing vocation of the area: although often restored, it is not widely used and it is largely abandoned.

The identification of spaces to be re-activated and the focus on Cagli led to the selection of abandoned or underused buildings or open spaces, considered as a “new” heritage for the municipality due to their potential for regeneration (Ferretti 2017). The selection process was based on the integration of two conditions: the guidelines provided by the administration and four pre-established characteristics. They have been originally defined “potential spaces” because, through their re-use, they can become re-activators of these fragile territories, starting from internal resources and preserving the memory of the place through their conservation based on sustainability (Mària and Salvadó 2017, 29–40). (Fig.1)



Fig. 1. Cagli's “potential spaces” (Benedetta Di Leo, 2022)

The Arena of Sant’Emidio, the former slaughterhouse, the San Francesco complex, the covered market, the bus station and the Mallio Bridge area in Cagli have been catalogued and studied in depth to understand their history, transformations, uses and current state. The aim is to make their adaptive reuse an opportunity to promote the quality of space and people’s lives and an activator of new networks.

Then the research addressed the central question of how these spaces could be re-activated: through which architectural interventions? What functions and services are needed? How can they be transformed into places that truly reflect the identity of the territory and its community?

To answer these questions, the study began by analysing a series of best practices aimed at collecting examples of spatial regeneration projects comparable in context, structure, and scale to those identified within the focus area. These cases proved fundamental in shaping the design explorations and informing feasible architectural strategies. They demonstrated how adaptive reuse can conserve resources, reduce waste, revitalize communities, and stimulate local economies, emphasizing the importance of embedding sustainability principles throughout every stage of the design process (Fuentes, 2017, 431–439). Therefore, the reuse of built heritage is not understood here as merely a pragmatic strategy, but as a crucial imperative for contemporary architectural practice.

In parallel, direct engagement with the territory proved essential to understand the history, dynamics, and needs of Cagli and its “potential spaces”. This phase was deepened through urban walks open to citizens, public presentations of the research, round tables with local stakeholders and interviews. Fundamental moments in the development of the design visions for these spaces, as preserving the essence of the building in adaptive reuse - both physical and functional—is what maintains its meaning and allows for substantial re-use. (Wong 2017).

Each phase of the research led to a partial but important result, each of which was summarised in a statement: “Built heritage. Preserving the existing; Potential spaces. Re-activating fragile territories; Reactive Map. Engaging local community; Trans-scalar approaches. Interweaving dimensions and disciplines.” These observations, combined and analysed together with the study of best practices, the results of fieldwork and insights gathered from dialogue with the community, led first to the development of some design explorations and then to the Manifesto for RESETting APPennines, that is both the closing of the research and the starting point towards more sustainable futures for these fragile territories.

Design Visions towards the Manifesto

In line with the research by design methodology, the explorations conducted in Cagli were systematically reworked and further developed through architectural design proposals re-activation of Cagli’s “potential spaces”. All the proposed visions provide for a gradual transformation, involving various short- and long-term uses and interventions, starting with temporary uses that are fundamental both for community involvement and adaptive reuse (Mérat et al. 2023, 180–189).

Among these, the re-activation of the San. Francesco complex—soon to be vacated by a school, leaving a significant void in the city center—represents a key case study. The proposed design envisions a phased regeneration strategy: first, the renovation of existing

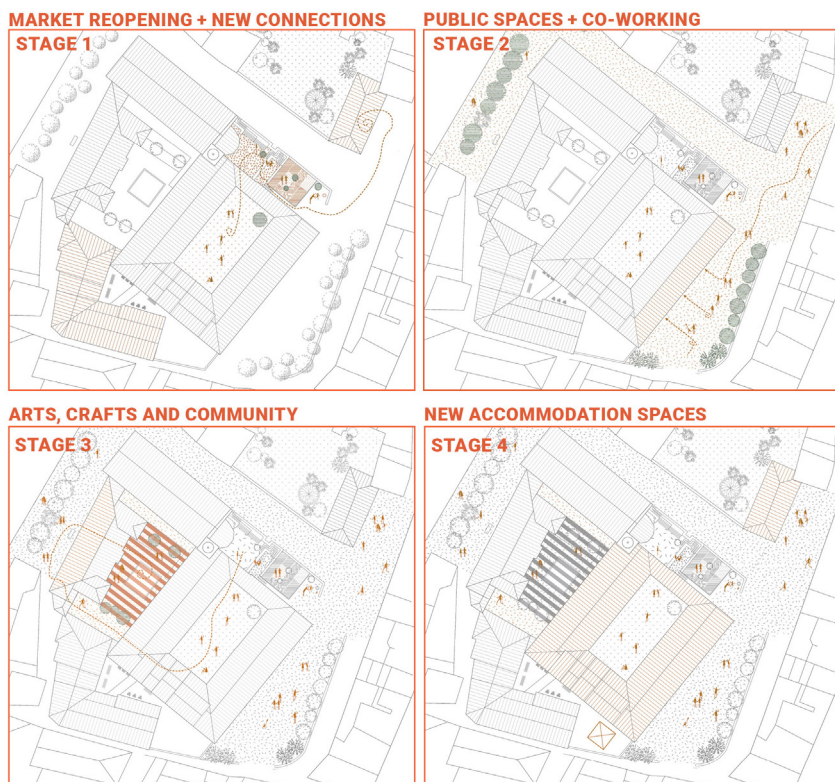


Fig. 2. Project stages for the re-activation and re-use of some of Cagli's "potential spaces": the San Francesco complex and the covered market (Benedetta Di Leo, 2024)

facilities hosting local associations; subsequently, the reconfiguration of the ground floor to include co-working areas, cafés, and spaces dedicated to arts and crafts; and finally, the transformation of the upper floor into a hostel replacing the current classrooms. (Fig. 2)

A similar design approach has also been applied to the former slaughterhouse, now used as a municipal warehouse. In this case, the proposal involves the selective demolition of part of the existing structure and the redesign of the surrounding public space. The initial plan is for temporary and flexible use of the site, providing space for intergenerational workshops involving both younger and older residents. Based on the results of these initial uses, the vision envisages the subsequent adaptation of the building to support its new functions through more substantial architectural transformations.

The projects developed were shared with the local administration: the relationship established with Cagli confirmed the importance of collaboration between universities and public authorities, revealing some unexplored potential to the municipality itself and generating short-, medium- and long-term impacts using the architectural project as a regenerative

tool. Although these projects are not realised, they can produce unexpected impulses, leading to new collaborations and ideas that, as happened in Cagli, local administrations can use in calls for funding for new interventions. The visions developed helped the local administration present change proposals to citizens. In fact, when a project is based on solid analysis and design quality, it can support transformative ideas even in complex and fragile contexts. The most recent meetings with the local community have shown that this research process has contributed to a renewed vision of development for the city: while local stakeholders initially seemed “passive” towards the stimuli provided, over time they have come to understand the importance of the proposed visions and are now discussing them proactively.

This iterative and multi-scalar approach was extended to many other “potential spaces” and to design explorations in other municipalities within the inner area, demonstrating the transferability of the hypotheses first developed for Cagli and their potential to inform regeneration processes in similarly structured territorial contexts.

The Manifesto

Building upon the four main observations that emerged from the research, the Manifesto supports the importance of architectural design in the process of re-activating and re-using the “potential spaces”, outlining a framework for a more sustainable and resilient future for inner areas. It serves as a document from which to (re)start, being a synthesis of strategies and actions for territorial promotion, the enhancement of cultural heritage and the transformation of living environments as catalysts for the rebirth of marginal territories. The aim is to make use of the knowledge acquired during the research and transfer it in a clear and replicable way, addressing not only architects and researchers but also politicians, administrators, stakeholders, associations, professionals, and local communities. Its clear and concise structure, but at the same time its incremental duality, makes it an effective tool to provide an overview of the results that emerged from the research. Results that can be expanded, deepened, challenged, and redefined, that are complex and intertwined, just like the “archipelago” (Carta 2017, 36–53) of villages dotting the ABPA. They stem from a trans-scalar and interdisciplinary approach, emerging from the study of maps, good practices, photographic campaigns, interviews, stories, surveys... and on which it seemed necessary to take stock. Therefore, the Manifesto is not intended to be a regulation, but rather a useful, versatile, and strategic tool for design research, capable of connecting past explorations with future experimentation, reaffirming the role of design as a driver of spatial, social, and cultural regeneration within the context of inner territories.

The Manifesto synthesizes the research findings into twelve principles, offering a set of guidelines and operational directions that can contribute to the re-settling of inner areas through the re-activation of “potential spaces”:

RESETtling through sustainable and innovative re-use—Promoting adaptive reuse that respects existing morphology and local resources, extending the lifecycle of buildings and fostering reversible, flexible, and sustainable transformations.

RESETtling through custom-made projects—Designing context-sensitive interventions that respond to the physical, social, and environmental specificities of each site, anticipating risk and enhancing place-based potential.

RESETtling imagining diffused and connected interventions: encouraging interlinked and

widespread projects across the “archipelago of villages”, strengthening inter-municipal cooperation through incremental and circular visions.

RESEtting with step-by-step solutions: adopting phased and flexible strategies for re-use, enabling immediate yet scalable interventions that sustain long-term transformation and community adaptation.

RESEtting by promoting mixité of uses and users : encouraging inclusive, intergenerational, and multifunctional spaces that accommodate diverse forms of living and working—ranging from social housing to temporary residencies for artists and researchers—while preventing gentrification, retaining local communities, and attracting new inhabitants to inner areas.

RESEtting by activating new common spaces: reclaiming and reprogramming spaces for collective use, reinforcing social cohesion, cultural participation, and community identity.

RESEtting using collaborative approaches: integrating bottom-up processes and participatory methods, positioning architectural design as a mediator between community aspirations and territorial transformation.

RESEtting through technology transfer: employing digital and technological innovation as catalysts for collaboration, knowledge exchange, and capacity-building among local actors.

RESEtting sharing commitments and visions: cultivating territorial awareness and shared responsibility among administrations, citizens, and local networks, promoting sustainable cultural and spatial practices.

RESEtting adopting an inter-scalar approach: designing through continuous dialogue between local and territorial scales, linking architectural interventions to larger infrastructural, environmental, and cultural frameworks.

RESEtting adopting a multidisciplinary approach: integrating architectural, economic, social, and environmental expertise in a holistic design process capable of addressing the complexity of inner areas.

RESEtting through regeneration projects: turning “potential spaces” into strategic hubs of innovation, culture, and knowledge, and using design as an instrument for systemic and enduring urban and territorial regeneration.

Through these twelve principles, the Manifesto for RESEtting APPennines establishes itself as both a theoretical synthesis and an operational tool—a bridge between research and practice. It reaffirms architectural design as a catalyst for activating “potential spaces”, fostering collective awareness, and envisioning new forms of habitability and resilience within Italy’s inner territories.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the Manifesto for RESEtting APPennines establishes the conceptual and operational foundations for new forms of living and habitat transformation in fragile and marginal contexts. Here, the adaptive reuse is redefined not merely as a reaction to a period of crisis, but as a responsible design approach (Fuentes 2014, 36–39)—a conscious and strategic process through which to experiment with cultural, productive, social, and environmental innovations. The re-activation of “potential spaces” thus becomes the starting point for the re-population of inner areas, where collaboration among local administrations, designers, researchers, and communities is essential for building shared visions and sustainable futures. The re-use of these places represents not only a new way

of designing, producing, distributing and enjoying culture, but also of creating generative welfare, which provides innovative responses to old needs or solutions to emerging ones. (Franceschinelli 2021). Finally, the Manifesto for RESETtling APPennines stands as a call to action for a more sustainable, inclusive, and innovative paradigm of regeneration. It combines the historical memory of places with the transformative energy required for their renewal, offering a model for future projects that respect the past, engage with the present, and embrace the challenges and opportunities of the future.

Notes

RESETtling APPennines – Territorial promotion, cultural heritage enhancement and living space transformation for a resilient rebirth of the Marche Apennines was a PhD project funded by the MUR as part of the “Research and Innovation 2015-17” Plan, ‘Human Capital’ axis of the Development and Cohesion Fund 20/21, rated Excellent with honours. (Author: B. Di Leo, Tutor: Prof. M. Ferretti, Co-Tutor: Prof. R. Quattrini).

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