

Reuse the Landscape in Post-Catastrophe Contexts

Reflections on the Case of San Martino Valle Caudina

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Abstract

This paper critically reconsiders the concept of reuse by moving beyond its conventional architectural framing and extending it to the landscape scale. Traditionally, reuse has been understood within a well-defined semantic and disciplinary framework, primarily concerned with architectural intervention: the physical transformation of a building, its spatial envelope, and its functional reprogramming. But what would happen if we applied the concept of reuse to landscapes? The framework becomes more complex when the concept of reuse is applied to broader territorial contexts. At the landscape scale, reuse is not simply the outcome of functional inadequacy, but rather the result of intertwined socioeconomic, ecological, and historical processes. In the Anthropocene—or, more precisely, the Capitalocene—landscapes have been profoundly reshaped by extractive logics that have altered the relationship between human communities and place. Over the past two centuries, these dynamics have produced significant traumas within the landscape, whose remediation processes give rise to complex scenarios.

This contribution focuses on the new suspended landscapes generated by anthropogenic interventions designed to mitigate or counteract the consequences of these dynamics, with particular attention to environmental engineering works that have become new, permanent traces within landscapes. Often conceived as purely utilitarian, these interventions nonetheless introduce new calligraphies into the landscape, while remaining largely devoid of symbolic or aesthetic dimension. As a result, they are frequently met with mistrust, detachment, and abandonment, fostering collective amnesia and weakening the capacity of communities to imagine future possibilities.

Keywords: Landscape, Reuse, Catastrophe

The definition of reuse always refers to a now well-established and structured semantic framework: a scale of intervention that is almost exclusively architectural; a design operation that, through the rules of composition, acts upon the building; and its functional re-purposing, which, starting from an analysis of its original function and intersecting the possibilities offered by its spatial anatomy with the needs of a community, defines new uses. The objective, therefore, is to refunctionalize the building, particularly the spatial envelope delineated by its walls. The envelope is reused, but the primary focus is the reuse of the underlying space, accommodating it, modifying it, and at times even negating it: it is liberated from the hegemony of time that rendered it unused and transposed into a new design dimension. After all, this has always been the task of good Architecture. It thus

becomes evident that reuse rests upon two fundamental pillars: the first is reuse understood as a technical, physical, and tangible act; the second is reuse conceived as function, spatial potential, usage, and new appropriation.

This contribution examines the possibility of moving beyond the spatial envelope defined by a building and applying the concept of reuse at a broader scale, one that surpasses the architectural—and, perhaps, even the urban scale—focusing instead on the landscape scale. While the motivations leading to a building's functional obsolescence, which in turn justify its reuse, are relatively clear at the architectural scale, they become considerably more complex to identify when shifting to a larger scale.

The Anthropocene—or, more precisely, the Capitalocene, for those wishing to engage more deeply with contemporary debates and adequately describe the magnitude and geography of human influence on the Earth system through the lens of capital (Moore 2017)—has transformed landscapes and continues to do so, profoundly affecting the relationship between landscape and the human communities inhabiting it. The capitalist machine, with its altered socio-cultural conditions and extractive imperatives dictated solely by profit, has caused significant disruptions in landscapes over the past two centuries, producing complex remediation processes that do not always yield definitive solutions. In some cases, the trauma becomes permanent, a deep scar in collective consciousness. The “nature-human action” equation, which for centuries guided landscape management through a measured cause-and-effect relationship rooted in care, has, since the Industrial Revolution, shifted exponentially toward a “do at any cost” logic. The consequences are now a daily reality. Natural disasters that follow—which are only “natural” in their final expressive form, not necessarily in origin—sometimes necessitate compensatory or emergency design interventions. This is precisely the aspect that becomes central in the relationship between reuse and landscape. These anthropogenic works implemented by humans to counteract such events—functional architectures that effectively take the form of environmental engineering projects—become additional calligraphies within the natural landscape, with which they must establish new relationships. Sometimes these works are large-scale, their impact on the landscape clearly visible; other times, they are almost imperceptible, blending seamlessly into the surroundings. Their utilitarian function, driven solely by ecological pragmatism and devoid of aesthetic dimension, often strips them of additional significance. They become expressions of urgency, necessity, and remedial or preventive operations stripped of any other value. Humans regard them with suspicion and fear, rarely forming meaningful connections. Even when these works are substantial in scale, distance is maintained; landscapes, in this way, become mute, mere spaces awaiting definition. The distrust generated, which often leads to abandonment, also engenders a form of collective amnesia regarding the series of individual and communal practices that had long nurtured the ability to imagine, anticipate, and aspire for the future in those places (Appadurai 2014). The inability to observe and imagine renders one blind to the perception of infinite potentials: the unforeseen combination of these anthropogenic signs with natural order can, for instance, produce what Gilles Clément terms “involuntary art”. It is art without an author, unpremeditated, devoid of messages; it is art belonging to no one, and precisely for that reason, to everyone (Clément 2019). It seeks the gaze of those inhabiting the place, wishing to comprehend its fragility, its continual evolution as an organism, but above all, its role as a space dedicated to a community and its practices.

The case study¹ presented, which initiated this reflection, is San Martino Valle Caudina, a small municipality in the province of Avellino (Campania, Italy) where two natural elements—the Gaudino stream and Monte Mafariello—have become central to a redefinition—or non-definition, depending on interpretation—of the threshold-landscape between the urban center and the mountains. Monte Mafariello is prone to landslides, occurring with almost mathematical regularity. Landslides occur because the mountain is composed of limestone overlaid with a thin layer of soil, and heavy rainfall exacerbates the problem. The mountain's weight, coupled with the mass of its trees, causes the soil to slide down the slopes toward the inhabited area. The scar of the last landslide, which took place in December 2019, is still visible: a gouge on the slope, a modeling of the earth that becomes even more pronounced at sunrise and sunset, when the mountain casts shadows upon itself, highlighting the *chiaroscuro* of its forms. Monte Mafariello dominates the southern part of San Martino, so it is impossible not to notice it. From any point in the town, you can see the displaced soil and the void that has not yet been reclaimed by nature. The mountain is mostly covered by chestnut groves, which used to be the mainstay of the local economy. The historic center of San Martino lies at its base, dominated by the promontory on which the Duke's castle is perched. The newer part of the town expanded northwards towards the valley; upstream, there is only the mountain.

The Gaudino stream is the second protagonist. Originating from Monte Acerone, it flows through the Partenio mountain system and, after a series of seven waterfalls, descends Monte Mafariello into San Martino, continuing eventually to Benevento. The relationship between the stream and the town has historically been complex. After leaving the last small waterfall at the mountain's base, it traversed a system of cultivated fields shaping the piedmont landscape, entered the historic center, circumnavigated the Duke's castle, regained a more natural dimension through undeveloped space, and then, passing through the old mill, reached the heart of the new part of San Martino, Piazza Girolamo del Balzo. A few meters further, it left the town to continue its course. For centuries, this relationship was relatively linear: the watercourse cut through the town, dividing it into right and left banks, connected by bridges, with a mill harnessing its hydraulic power, and children swimming up to the waterfalls. Following Italian Unification, during the reconstruction of the town hall, a new building was constructed centrally in Piazza Girolamo del Balzo. Its foundations inevitably encroached upon the streambed, complicating management of the building and public space. Consequently, the stream was buried along its course from the old mill past the town hall, and over the following century, as the last witnesses of this urban transformation passed away, the stream was also buried in collective memory. By the mid-twentieth century, improvements in sanitary conditions led to the disuse of cesspools in favor of sewer systems, which, however, discharged directly into the stream. Persistent odors in the sections of the stream still traversing the town created collective discomfort, prompting the burial of these sections. Over a century, the town's relationship with the stream changed drastically. This natural element, around which San Martino had developed, was excluded from new dynamics, marginalized, and confined to peripheral areas where it would not interfere. Most importantly, it was forgotten. Its geography, the sound of its flowing waters, and its subterranean existence were erased from collective awareness. This amnesia extended even to pragmatic aspects, such as its maintenance. Similarly, the slopes of Monte Mafariello experienced abandonment from the second half of the twentieth

century. Following the so-called “chestnut blight” of the 1950s and socio-economic changes improving quality of life, maintenance of the chestnut groves ceased. Owners died, lands passed to heirs, and care was forgotten. The mountain began to weigh heavily. Over the past century, successive landslides caused soil and timber to accumulate silently in the buried streambed, hidden from view. The December 2019 landslide released 25,000 cubic meters of material—stones, soil, and trees—filling the streambed, transporting the debris downstream, and creating an accumulation barrier near Piazza Girolamo del Balzo. The ground cracked under subsurface water pressure, flooding the town. After more than one hundred and fifty years, the Gaudino stream reclaimed its right to exist. Debates concerning the future of this chasm, which extends along much of the town hall’s main façade and exposes parts of its foundations, remain active, particularly among experts and citizens. The presence of this stream, now flowing openly after so long, has disrupted local patterns of habitation.

The consequences of the earth movements in San Martino Valle Caudina extend beyond the reclamation of the Gaudino stream—an event which attracted the most media attention—to the creation of safety infrastructures that have profoundly altered the landscape at the base of Monte Mafariello. Following a previous landslide in 1999, authorities intervened extensively with major environmental engineering works, including reinforced concrete check weirs, significantly changing the landscape perception and establishing a further barrier between town and mountain. This likely contributed to the estrangement of many residents from local knowledge. Two of these large-scale infrastructure projects were built on sites where mountains had previously collapsed. A third project is planned under a high-risk slope. These infrastructures have generated landscapes that, despite their permanence, are neglected by the community, existing paradoxically in invisibility and indifference, situated on the margins, stripped of value, as they lie outside any functional or utilitarian logic of individual use. But these landscapes are not invisible. Their legitimacy lies in their territorial scale, nearly doubling the town’s area. Although purely instrumental and responsible for the disappearance of traditional agricultural practices, these concrete calligraphies act like tattoos, delineating the distance between town and mountain, forming landscapes “awaiting disaster”. This negative framing excludes them from community practices, condemning them to a suspended temporal-spatial dimension. This was not always the case. These fields were once central to agricultural practices. Where check weirs now mark the space around the stream, defining boundaries for safety and landslide mitigation, cultivated fields once existed, irrigated by the stream. Inhabitants historically feared landslides but maintained an empathetic relationship with the mountain, aware that with proper care, disasters could be prevented. These places, even under perpetual threat, retained significant meaning. Today, they remain marginal due to a lack of trust in institutional care, resulting in detachment from the dynamics at play.

San Martino Valle Caudina represents a snapshot of a reality made up of multiple “waiting landscapes”, where infrastructural elements have suspended the relationship between place and community. The question is thus clear: can the definition of reuse be extended to such landscapes? Now that the presence of these new emergency devices, which define new landmarks on a territorial scale, has been established, it is important to ask ourselves what kind of relationship a community can establish with the new landscapes that these devices activate—or, in some ways, deactivate—and what the future visions might be in

terms of reuse. It is necessary to move beyond salvific or utopian narratives of restoration, as well as paralyzing catastrophism, which prevent alternative visions. Instead, adopting a harawayan stance of “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016), we should ask: how do we inhabit these landscapes now that the damage has occurred? What new relationships can emerge in a post-catastrophe landscape where instability prevails and heterogeneous, discordant elements coexist? A landscape consists of relationships, and those defining the previous landscape have changed or vanished. Restoration of a lost order, or ecological recovery as trauma erasure, is not possible. What is possible is learning to inhabit differently, forging an alliance with disaster, and designing in altered conditions with the place itself. It involves taking responsibility for what remains, caring for what is still possible, and embracing opportunities for coexistence in a changed world, within a complex temporal framework that synchronizes human and non-human times. Above all—and even more complex—times that synchronize different speeds, where the slowness of ecological time clashes with the voracity of political and economic time as well as the subjectivity of human time, understood as the time needed for a community to process trauma and regain a new awareness.



Fig. 1. Landscapes awaiting disaster. San Martino Valle Caudina (Davide Lucia, 2024)

Notes

1. The case study discussed here is situated within a research experience developed as part of the “Motus Terrae” summer school, held in July 2024 within the module “Marginal Territories,” coordinated by Serena Olcuire and Alberto Marzo, with the participation of Dario Gentili, Daniela Angelucci, Felice Cimatti and Federico Luisetti, as part of the Second-Level Master’s degree in Environmental Humanities at the Roma Tre University.

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