

Design Strategies for the Adaptive Reuse of Decommissioned Rural Churches

The Case of the Coastal Landscape of Sardinia

Carla Sechi^a, Pier Francesco Cherchi^b, Marco Lecis^c

^aUniversità degli studi di Cagliari, Cagliari, Italy, caarlasechi@gmail.com; ^bUniversità degli studi di Cagliari, Cagliari, Italy, pierf.chechi@unica.it; ^c Università degli studi di Cagliari, Cagliari, Italy, marco.lecis@unica.it

Abstract

This paper presents a doctoral study focused on adaptive reuse strategies for decommissioned rural churches. These buildings, often located in isolated or marginal contexts, exemplify a significant challenge within Europe's ecclesiastical heritage. The ongoing decline in the liturgical function of many religious complexes has led to their progressive disuse, abandonment, and, consequently, a growing cultural and architectural crisis. The research investigates how these structures, despite the loss of their original religious function, can be reinterpreted and revitalized as active components of the cultural landscape. Adaptive reuse is seen not merely as a conservation tool for the built heritage but as an opportunity to restore meaningful relationships between the architectural asset, local communities, and the surrounding environment. The methodology combines a critical review of specialist literature with a comparative analysis of selected European case studies, with particular emphasis on areas affected by depopulation. The cases are analyzed to identify effective design approaches, reuse strategies, and governance models that reconcile heritage protection with the introduction of new functions. Special focus is placed on architectural and compositional strategies aimed at spatial and functional transformation, landscape integration, and the social impact of the interventions. This study aims to contribute to the theoretical discourse on adaptive reuse while providing practical tools and guidelines for architects, policymakers, and practitioners engaged in the sustainable regeneration of disused religious sites. By adopting an integrated approach that operates at both the scale of the individual building and the broader territorial context, the research proposes a framework in which rural churches can become catalysts for cultural and territorial resilience, fostering sustainable development in contemporary rural settings.

Keywords: Church, Reuse, Landscape

Introduction

Many architects who have engaged with sacred architecture—from Le Corbusier to Tadao Andō, from Louis Kahn to Peter Zumthor—have expressed, both in words and deeds, a shared conviction: that the spiritual essence of a place must transcend matter. «When I come across a building that has developed a special presence in connection with the place it stands in, I sometimes feel that it is imbued with an inner tension that refers to something

over and above the place itself. It seems to be part of the essence of its place, and at the same time it speaks of the world as a whole» (Zumthor 1998, 36). Thus Peter Zumthor, in his book *Thinking Architecture*, describes architecture's ability to root itself deeply in its site, absorbing matter and memory, and at the same time to transcend it—evoking a universal dimension of human experience.

The making of sacred space has often been conceived as an alchemical process in which matter becomes the vehicle of the invisible, of silence, of light, of mystery, until dissolving into the numinous. In this study I am interested in investigating the case in which the building is reduced to a ruin to explore the residual qualities of matter where spirituality has gone, dissipated, lost through cultural erosion, secularization, or simple oblivion. It is a question of turning the gaze away from a transcendence that emerges from matter, and instead toward matter itself, which endures beyond the dissolution of the sacred. A matter that is no longer the container of rites, but a fragment, a ruin, a mute presence. In this silent resistance, in this material excess that escapes the spiritual power, we shall attempt to trace another form of meaning.

The decline in religious practice, together with the depopulation of some areas and the high cost of maintenance, generate a growing number of abandoned religious buildings. In buildings of this kind, attention to the possibility of reuse must address not only a defined regulatory framework but also the cultural and social significance the place once represented.

Religious architecture, although currently unused, still has a value that transcends its function and testifies to a history that encompasses not only the building itself but the entire territorial system on which it stands. The landscape, devoid of extensive urban settlements but characterised by the punctual presence of architectural artefacts and road traces, configures itself as a recognisable and distinctive space thanks to the stratification of built episodes and identity-elements.

The investigation focuses on disused religious architecture, devoid of active liturgical functions. The field of analysis is further restricted to sacred built heritage located in rural contexts, external to and independent of inhabited settlements.

Rural Churches and Landscape Dimension

Churches located in rural areas thus become the occasion to put attention to a landscape dimension which embraces and defines architectural typology. Saying rural church we mean a building located outside urban centres, in agrarian or isolated areas, often tied to forms of popular worship, pilgrimages or local festivals. Such objects often do not hold a stable parish role but carry out a significant devotional function within the territory, representing a spiritual and identity-reference point for local communities.

The semantic and social scope of an architectural work justifies a particular level of care. Although often modest in size, these buildings constitute foundational components of the landscape and are, in many cases, located in strategic and dominant positions within the territorial system to which they belong. Therefore, the territorial analysis cannot disregard a study of the nodal points which describe and justify the settlement scheme traced by circumscribed constructive actions. The interrelation between the built object and the landscape system retains a semasiological ambivalence in which the meaning and efficacy of a work are amplified by its strategic location and, at the same time, the natural spatial

ambit acquires new centrality and symbolic relevance thanks to the anthropic action.

On one hand, indeed, architecture draws its strength from the position it occupies, thereby reinforcing the perceived value of the work through the landscape qualities and characteristics. On the other hand, the presence of a built object, endowed with a particular symbolic and spiritual meaning, transforms the territory by attributing to it a strong identity and cultural connotation. In this dynamic exchange these two forces, anthropic and natural, reinforce each other; one becomes icon and interpreter of the place, the other becomes privileged theatre of a spatial and spiritual experience.

At the centre of this analysis there is not exclusively the architectural object, but the complexity of the cultural, urban and environmental landscape within which it is inserted. It thus becomes central to recognise the territorial structures that define the identity of places. Disused heritage must be reconsidered through a reinterpretation of landscape characteristics, informed by contemporary proposals that address spatial needs in relation to design aspirations emerging from an analysis of the present context. Disused religious architectures, though currently unused, represent an identity-forming and stratified component of the cultural landscape; this is one of the reasons that prompts the study toward possible reuse scenarios that consider the architectural heritage in question.

It is moreover true that the *European Landscape Convention* defines landscape as the result of natural actions and anthropic actions, emphasising the role of the perception of the territorial system also in terms of the relationships generated by the contact between human and natural events (European Landscape Convention, Article 1). In this cultural and operational perspective, the punctiform elements, such as small rural churches, compose a constellation of built events which contribute to characterise the place, making it recognisable (Venturi Ferriolo 2016). They are artificial interventions capable of strengthening territorial meaning, conferring to the landscape a peculiar and distinctive character.

Although marginal in the contemporary settlement system, disused religious architectures retain a significant historical, cultural and social value, which justifies an in-depth reflection in terms of reuse, conservation and valorisation. Architectural recovery, in fact, not only constitutes an opportunity for the conservation of the built object, but also for re-establishing meaningful relationships between the built heritage, the resident community, and the surrounding environment.

Norms and Contemporary Approaches to Church Reuse

The theme of reuse of abandoned religious buildings falls within a complex debate regulated by a combined set of national, regional and canonical norms. There is no single law that exclusively governs the reuse of religious buildings. The dialogue on the future of abandoned ecclesiastical buildings concerns the contemporary architectural debate, but attention to this theme has been shown for some decades. The Italian Episcopal Conference, with the document *I beni culturali della Chiesa in Italia. Orientamenti* of 1992, integrates the *Norme per la tutela e la conservazione del patrimonio storico-artistico della Chiesa in Italia* approved by the X General Assembly of Italian Bishops and published on 14 June 1974. The 1992 text highlights a classification of ecclesiastical assets and explores possibilities for their reuse. Although changing the use of these buildings is considered feasible, continuity of use according to their original functions is always preferred (Cavana 2009).

The investigation of new functional re-configuration modes of ecclesiastical spaces,

oriented to their reutilisation and valorisation, today is configured not only as a design opportunity, but also as a cultural responsibility towards the architectural and historical heritage. In the absence of such prospects, in fact, many of these buildings concretely risk falling into a state of abandonment and consequent decay, irreversibly compromising their material and immaterial value.

Over the past decades, an increasing need has emerged to rethink sacred spaces not only as places exclusively intended for religious practice, but also as multifunctional spaces capable of hosting new forms of social interaction, culture, and collective participation. This need takes part into a broader debate on the evolution of the role of religious architecture within the contemporary context, this approach focuses attention on the subtle balance between preserving the original identity of these buildings and opening them to new uses that can respond to the emerging needs of communities.

An experience that addresses and deepens this theme is represented by the 16th edition of *Manifesta*¹ which will dedicate particular attention to the reuse of ecclesiastical architectures. Within this context, the project *This is Not a Church* critically examines the future of disused churches and explores their potential reintegration into the urban fabric through processes of cultural and social reconversion. The declared objective is to transform these spaces into new centres of civic aggregation, capable of fostering practices of active and collective participation through the implementation of artistic, cultural and functional interventions. Thus, the possibility is explored of reading the sacred building as a cultural infrastructure, no longer bound only to the liturgical dimension, but open to new interpretations able to dialogue with ongoing social transformations.

Recent initiatives reinforce the urgency of a comprehensive, multidisciplinary inquiry into the functions that such spaces can assume in contemporary society. This is especially relevant in light of the increasing need for inclusive, shared environments that strengthen community ties.

The reflection on the reuse of churches is configured not only as an operation of architectural and functional recovery, but also as a political act that questions the ways in which urban spaces can be re-activated to respond to the needs of a continually evolving collectivity.

Among the most common reuse hypotheses are permanent installations and temporary exhibitions; some Venetian experiences bear witness to these architectural planning ideas (Marini 2020). It is the case, among others, of the installation *When the Body Says Yes*, realised during the Venice Biennale in 2022 and curated by Melanie Bonajo. The Dutch artist works in the Church of the Misericordia, in the centre of Venice, covering surfaces with soft coloured drapings and fabrics on which people can stay during an immersive video projection that explores the personal perception of human intimacy. The liturgical space is thus transformed a temporary installation which re-interprets the architectural matter deprived of its spirituality. Similarly, the collective *Ocean Space* uses the Church of San Lorenzo, also located in Venice, as venue for temporary art events. In this context, the sacred space serves as a scenographic frame, although not directly involved in the meaning of the exhibited works.

Both cases testify a design practice which, while intervening in an ephemeral and non-invasive manner, can establish a dialogue between contemporary art and historical-architectural heritage.

There are also architectural interventions that have permanently modified the sacred space as happens in the recovery project of the St. Agnes Church in Berlin, by the German architect Arno Brandhuber. The architectural object becomes a contemporary art gallery that reuses the sacred spaces adapting them to the new function (El Croquis 2018).

An Applied Study in Sardinia

In the case of Sardinia, the territory is characterised for the most part by extensive scarcely urbanised countryside, punctuated by the sporadic presence of settlements functional to agricultural and hospitality activities. In this context, the archetype of the rural church is recognised as a significant element of the island's agrarian landscape: a symbolic and functional stronghold intimately connected both to the rites that involve communities and to the places in which it stands.

In several cases, such buildings have progressively modified their initial intended use, they are now territorial landmarks, reference points that maintain an identity value for the landscape and the cultural heritage of the community. The territorial system is keeper of collective memories which feed on past times and contemporary episodes intrinsically connected to the cultural and social passages of the place (Turri 1998).

Despite the cessation of liturgical use, the architecture retains an ambiguous relationship with the sacredness of these spaces which continue to preserve the dense and stratified meaning of the territories: a value that cannot be neglected in any design reflection aimed at reuse. Alongside the semantic dimension of architecture, it becomes essential to consider the relationship between the sacred space and the archaic territory in which it stands in. Because these structures are often located in peripheral or isolated positions, they invite a reading of architecture that goes beyond the object itself. This perspective encourages an exploration of the factors shaping the spatial relationships between the architectural form and the open environment around it.

In this perspective, the meaning of the place and the link with the local community are assumed as guiding principles of reuse hypotheses, in order to make explicit the value of these architectures at the territorial scale. From this awareness it will be possible to elaborate design interventions that are coherent with the context and capable of giving new life to the buildings without changing their essence.

Centrality is not assumed as a static datum, but rather as a dynamic outcome of processes of reading and design that interweave morphology, accessibility, local ecologies and user-practices. In this perspective, pre-existences are interpreted as devices capable of generating new conditions of usability and spatiality.

This study cannot overlook the identification of specific architectural objects on which focus the design. It is useful to establish a set of selection criteria to define the areas of intervention. The extra-urban location of the building, as already highlighted, is one key condition. The second point concerns the state of conservation of the building, which must be sufficient to satisfy the third condition: the recognizability of its former liturgical function.

The geographical conditions of Sardinia invite a further reflection on the specificities of the coastal landscape (Fig. 1) that develops special relations with the agrarian fabric in the complexity of natural space and anthropic material objects. In these areas, the relationship between the coastline and the agrarian belt generates unique spatial configurations,

characterised by a pattern in which natural elements, soil morphologies and agricultural practices combine with built objects and human infrastructures. Such interaction produces sequences of places that are not only functional, but also strongly symbolic, reflecting stories of use, adaptation and appropriation of the territory.

Starting from these presuppositions, it is possible to identify some of these artefacts distributed across the regional context, which constitute significant nodes for the understanding of the spatial, functional and symbolic dynamics of the territory (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Coastal landscape of Sardinia, Quartu Sant'Elena (CA) (Carla Sechi, 2025)

The study of these episodes allows for the development of a conceptual and operational framework: on one hand, a theoretical apparatus aimed at recognizing typological, morphological and semantic invariants, capable of clarify the relations between form, function and meaning; on the other hand, a set of design strategies finalised to targeted interventions, capable of valorising the existing potentialities, reinterpreting spatial hierarchies and promoting new ways of use and interaction with the landscape. This approach allows us to consider architectural artefacts not merely as isolated elements, but as components of a larger system, where historical continuity, collective memory, and functional dynamics intertwine with opportunities for transformation and reuse. In this way, design scenarios can emerge that integrate conservation, innovation, and symbolic meaning. A crucial point for landscape protection in Sardinia occurs in 2006, the year in which the *Piano Paesaggistico Regionale* (PPR) was approved; a planning instrument with the objective of «preservare, tutelare, valorizzare e tramandare alle generazioni future l'identità ambientale, storica, culturale e insediativa del territorio sardo; proteggere e tutelare il paesaggio culturale e naturale e la relativa biodiversità; assicurare la salvaguardia del territorio e promuoverne forme di sviluppo sostenibile, al fine di conservarne e migliorarne le qualità»² and which

defines the coastal perimeter as a «categoria dei beni paesaggistici d'insieme considerata risorsa strategica fondamentale per lo sviluppo sostenibile del territorio sardo, che necessita di pianificazione e gestione integrata».³

The value of the urban-planning instrument as a device for ensuring the care of natural ambits is undoubted; today however, nearly twenty years after its approval, the static nature of the apparatus becomes evident in relation to possible reuse opportunities of architecture in these regulated areas. The dual result thus achieved contains fundamental aspects for the



Fig. 2. Church of Nostra Signora di Bonaria, Quartu Sant'Elena (CA) (Carla Sechi, 2025)

understanding of the value of the coastal landscape but tells of a weakness linked to the absence of specific thinking for the different domains of analysis. The failure to calibrate the instrument has frozen a territorial system which requires appropriate ideas to safeguard the existing heritage in relationship to the fragility and the evolution of the context.

Conclusions

The methodology proposed is configured as the outcome of an applied experience matured at the DICAAR (Department of Civil, Environmental and Architecture Engineering of the University of Cagliari), which has long been conducting research on the nuragic landscape through the integrated analysis of the network of 32 sites proposed for nomination to the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The significance attributed to the individual architectural object, derived from its social, cultural, semantic, or historical value, can overshadow the spatial context in which it is situated, shifting attention away from the landscape scale. This is the case with the nuraghi, whose intrinsic and immediately legible value is widely recognised, as well as with religious buildings, which, by virtue of the meanings they embody, enjoy explicit and acknowledged

significance. The method proposed intends to demonstrate how the study of the single architectural object cannot be reduced to a mere point-analysis but must consider the totality of the landscape elements including the interferences and emergences which characterise the anthropic actions and their relationship with territorial peculiarities. The territorial structure and the punctual object merge in a duality from which both elements reinforce themselves and justify a discourse of safeguarding and reuse them.

Notes

1. Manifesta is a European itinerant biennial exhibition. Its sixteenth edition will take place in the Ruhr territory, a historic region of Germany.
2. «preserve, protect, enhance and hand down to future generations the environmental, historical, cultural and settlement identity of the Sardinian territory; to protect and preserve the cultural and natural landscape and the related biodiversity; to ensure the safeguarding of the territory and promote its sustainable development, in order to conserve and improve its qualities»
3. «category of landscape assets taken as a strategic resource fundamental for the sustainable development of Sardinian territory, which requires integrated planning and management».

Bibliography

- Bates, Stephen, and Beruno Krucker. *Built in Stone. Romanesque Churches in Sardinia*. Munich: Studio Krucker Bates (TUM), 2025.
- Consiglio d'Europa. *European landscape convention. Article 1 – Definitions*. Florence: Council of Europe, 2020.
- Conferenza Episcopale Italiana. *The cultural heritage of the Church in Italy: Guidelines*, Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1992.
- Cavana, Paolo. “The issue of decommissioned places of worship”. *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, 3, 1–21, 2009.
- El Croquis. “Brandlhuber+ 1996–2018” (No. 194). Madrid: El Croquis Editorial, 2018.
- Marini, Sara. *Guide to the “closed” churches of Venice*. Melfi: Libria, 2020.
- Regione Autonoma della Sardegna. PPR - Piano Paesaggistico Regionale: Primo ambito omogeneo. (Approvato con Deliberazione della Giunta Regionale n. 33/1 del 10 agosto 2004). Cagliari: Regione Autonoma della Sardegna, 2006.
- Turri, Eugenio. *Il paesaggio come teatro: dal territorio vissuto al territorio rappresentato*. Venezia: Marsilio, 1998.
- Schwarz, Rudolf. *The Church Incarnate. The Sacred Function Of Christian Architecture*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1958.
- Venturi Ferriolo, Massimo. *Paesaggi in movimento: per un'estetica della trasformazione*. Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2016.
- Wong, Liliane. *Adaptive Reuse in Architecture. A Typological Index*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2016.
- Zumthor, Peter. *Thinking architecture*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 1998.