

# MAKING THINGS.

## Practicing co-creation in the marginal territories of central Apennine.

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# Introduction

This contribution aims to discuss two interconnected and ongoing research projects working on the re-activation of some municipalities in the Marche Region central Apennine in Italy with the goal to regenerate them through architecture: a Project of Relevant National Interest, *Branding4Resilience*, and a connected PhD research, *RESETtling APPennines. Territorial promotion, cultural heritage enhancement and transformation of living space for a resilient revival of the Marche Apennines*, both funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research. *Branding4Resilience* (B4R) is a project that links four universities (Università Politecnica delle Marche, Università degli Studi di Trento, Università degli Studi di Palermo, Politecnico di Torino) and investigates four Italian inner areas. The intention is to bring out their ability to adapt to the changes and current environmental, social, economic challenges, they are facing by building operative branding actions. The research focuses on places and projects, starting with tourism as a driver of new dynamics of reactivation and resilient transformation of territories.

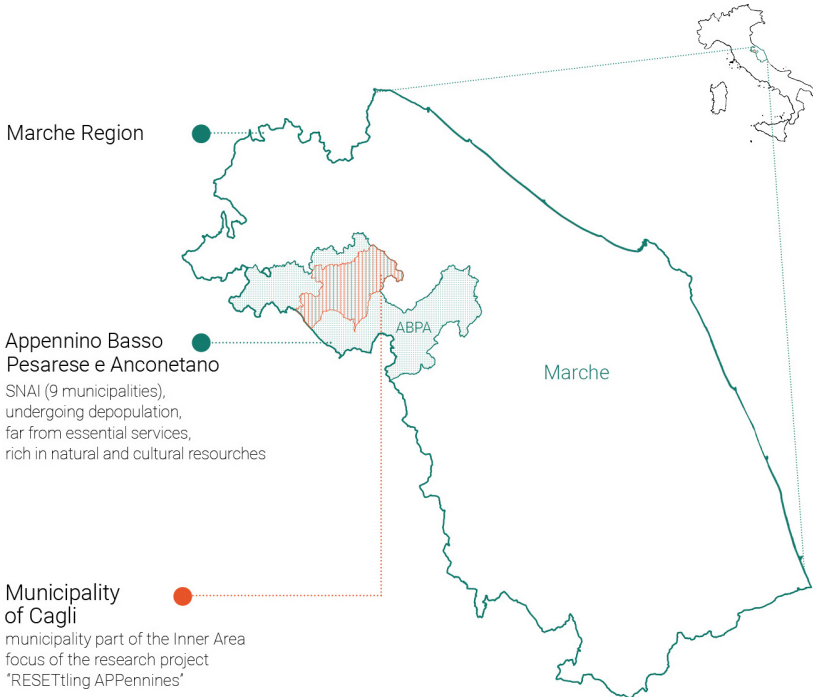
In particular, our research unit focuses on one inner area in the Marche Region, Italy: the Appennino Basso Pesarese e Anconetano (ABPA), the same area investigated by *RESETtling APPennines*.

Both projects adopt a multi-disciplinary, trans-scalar and multi-level approach, but while the former is more concerned with investigating the large scale, looking for solutions that network municipalities and developing replicable

territorial strategies, the other focuses specifically on the small city of Cagli, developing meta-projects that enable the reactivation of its “potential spaces”.

Both research projects aim to support the involved administrations in defining and implementing strategic regeneration projects that, as accelerators of community resilience, become starting engines to activate new economies and new life cycles.

This promotes a shared vision of the future (*co-thinking*) that starts from the relationships and identity of places.

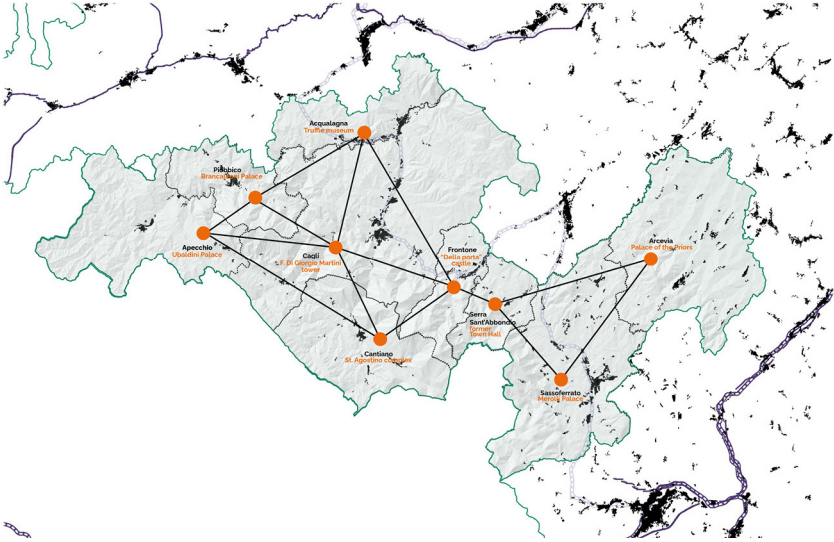


The inner area of Marche Region, in Italy: the Appennino Basso Pesarese e Anconetano (ABPA), the area investigated by the Branding4Resilience research project and by the PhD project “RESETting APPennines”. Elaboration by B. Di Leo, 2021

# The Inner Areas

The Appennino Basso Pesarese e Anconetano is a territory that includes nine rural-mountain municipalities and it has been defined as the Marche Region's pilot area for the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) (Barca et al., 2014). 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, namely the municipalities distant from essential services, such as education, health and mobility, and rich in important natural and cultural resources. Usually in these areas there is a lack of network between the centres, both because of weak infrastructure and of a cultural closure of each place. The national strategy allowed the area to realize some joint projects that contributed to strengthen the connection among the participating municipalities. For example, the nine cities host the "Asili d'Appennino", a network of important cultural buildings that have been reactivated for the rebirth of the territory through a new model of local development based on creative residences and enhancement of the cultural landscape. The administrations of these fragile territories are also supported by the university, which goes *beyond the mandate* to analyse and design the urban spaces and can guide them both in analysing and interpreting data and in identifying the strengths that could be enhanced (Ferretti et al., 2022). Moreover, in line with the strategic goals of the inner area, our research projects rely on existing projects and relationships between university and the local governments.

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Map of the "Asili d'Appennino": a network of important cultural buildings that have been reactivated for the rebirth of the Appennino Basso Pesarese e Anconetano through a new model of local development based on creative residences and enhancement of the cultural landscape. Elaboration by B. Di Leo, 2023



Villages, landscapes and built heritage of the Appennino Basso Pesarese e Anconetano: Pianello (Cagli) and the Bosso river; Cagli theater; the former cement factory of Sassoferrato; the former railway station of Piobbico; F. Di Giorgio Martini tower; Loretello (Arcevia); view of Cantiano; Church of S. Lorenzo (Acqualagna); Church della Madonna del Fosso (Loretello). Pictures by M. Ferretti, B. Di Leo; 2019-2021

## INNER AREAS

### WICKED PROBLEMS

Pietrzyk K. Wicked Problems in Architectural Research:  
The Role of Research by Design. *ARENA Journal of Architectural Research*. 2022

practical problems that must be dealt with and addressed in order to create a better future through the continuous development of new knowledge, by researching strategies and different methods

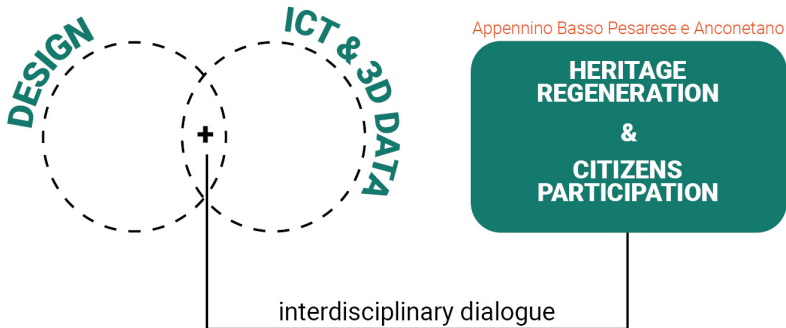
### RESEARCH BY DESIGN

Design as a tool of knowledge

Through the design project, the research investigates and understands local issues, aiming to solve them through the **development of new ways of intervention**.

Building of **possible scenarios** at different scales, verified through the project tool, fundamental for the **dialogue with the local administration** and for triggering new material and immaterial relations between municipalities.

Clear and replicable design approach, through an iterative process of analysis, understanding and designing



# Methods and tools

Given the complexity and the richness of the area, the research operates with different qualitative-quantitative tools and with an integrated, multi-scalar and trans-disciplinary approach.

The initial deep analysis of the territory allowed us to understand how the inner areas are characterized by those that Rittel and Webber (1973) call *wicked problems*, i.e. planning problems that lack clarity both in objectives and solutions and that are difficult to solve by a specific method. For these reasons, they need to be addressed and managed to create a better future through the continuous development of new knowledge, through a search for different strategies and methods (Pietrzyk, 2022).

Consequently, we realized that the best way to address the ABPA municipalities' problems was the *research-by-design* method (Roggema, 2016), because it can build future scenarios through a process in which research components and spatial design activities are mixed. The architectural project becomes an integrated part of the research process and at the same time, the researcher uses a clear and replicable design approach through an iterative process of analysis, understanding and design.

The *research-by-design* approach is both exploratory and innovative (Di Leo B., 2022) in that it involves experimentation with ideas, materials and technologies, but also the research of cultural, social, economic, aesthetic and ethical issues (Strand, 1997), hypothesizing multiple futures

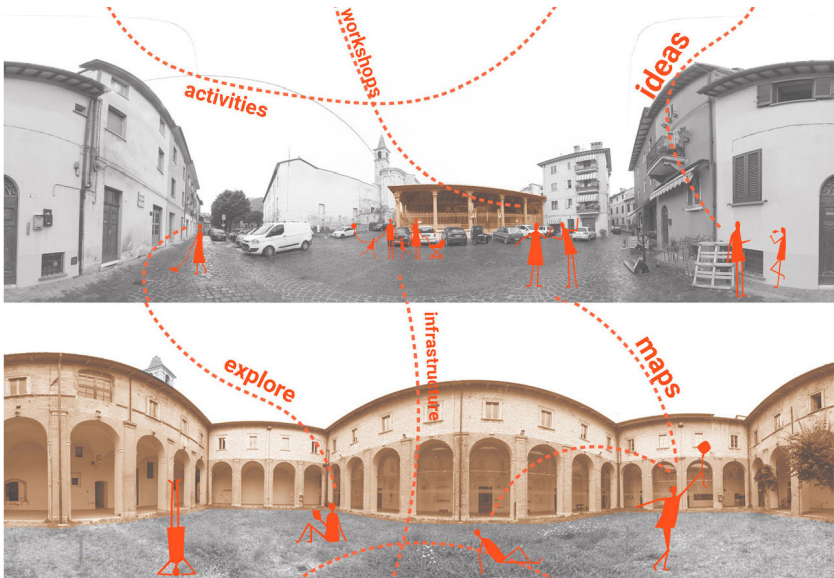
for the area (Frieling, 2001). It is based on a combination of on-field research, action-research (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992; Swann, 2002; Herr, 2017) and collaborative processes, thanks to which researchers can understand potentials and risks of the place and have a more direct relationship with local communities. The interdisciplinary approach and in particular the use of new technologies as a design participation tool allows us to imagine innovative design methods to enable heritage regeneration and community engagement in the inner areas by testing new technologies. The researcher goes beyond the mandate of investigation in that he/she begins a dialogue with the administration and the community to guide them through analysis and interpretation of data, towards the identification of strengths to be further enhanced (Ferretti et al., 2022). In this circular process research thus becomes at the same time, a study of the design project and a process of producing knowledge through the design action itself (Viganò, 2010).

## RESEARCH ON FIELD AND INTERVIEWS

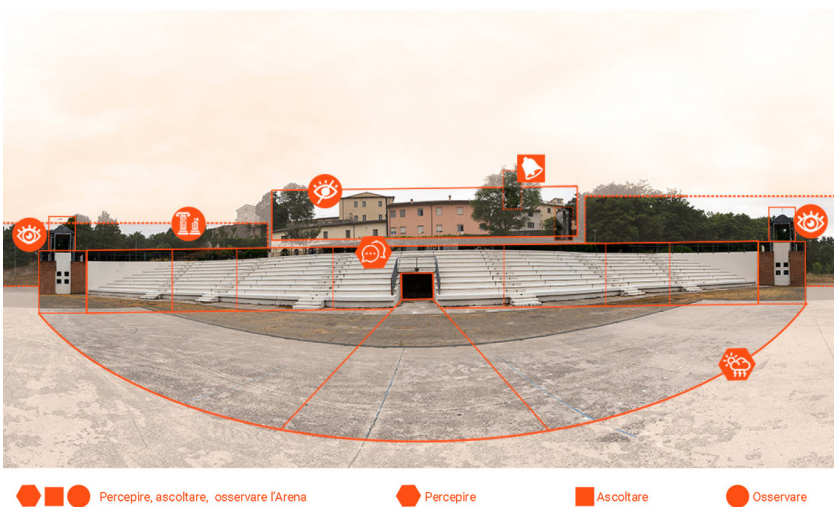
From these premises, and given the rich complexity of inner areas, the identification of new scenarios and perspectives for the city's future requires planning and designing on multiple levels and through multiple tools. We identified thus the need of a trans-scalar approach. The initial reading of the territory, its data and values, but especially the numerous site surveys were fundamental in framing, in the first instance, the focus area and understand its *wicked problems* and potentials: the ABPA is dotted by rural-mountain villages, characterized by a rich built heritage, often abandoned and underutilized, but isolated from



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Panorama photos of some "potential spaces" in Cagliari. From the top: the covered market and the former convent of San Francesco. Elaboration by B. Di Leo, 2020

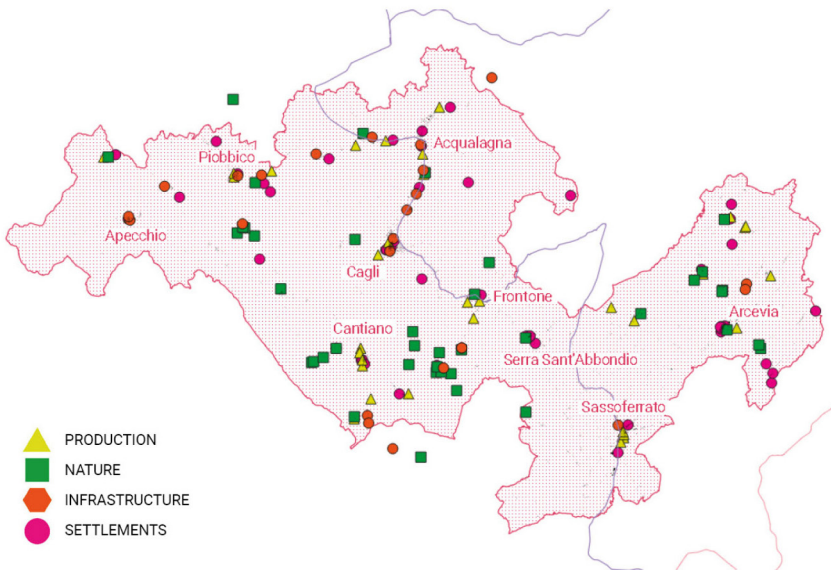
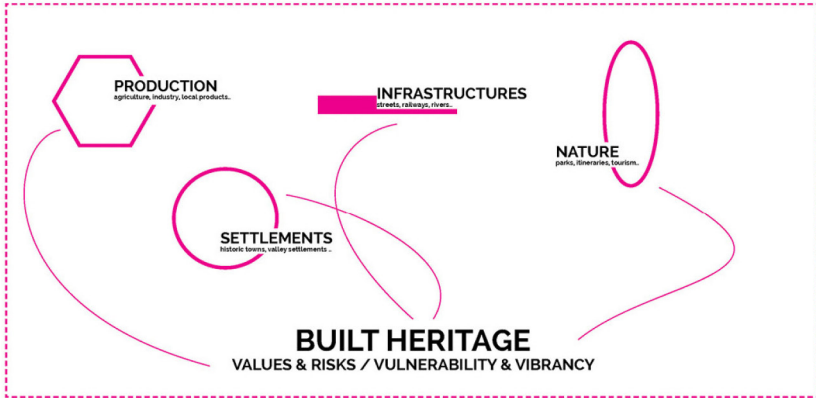


Spatial-perceptive analysis of the Sant'Emidio Arena, Cagliari. Elaboration by B. Di Leo, 2020

each other and from the major urban centers due to scarce infrastructure and services. The research on field allowed us to envisage a perceptive analysis of spaces and ongoing relational dynamics while collecting data on the field. The surveys have focused attention on the built heritage, which has been mapped and classified as related to: production, infrastructure, settlements and nature and studied in its values and risks, in its vulnerability and vibrancy.

Built heritage in the APBA is mostly concentrated in urban centres but it is also spread in the rest of the territory, where it is often linked to nature parks or to agricultural areas. The exploration of the territory has allowed us to map the ordinary, but also the degraded and the forgotten heritage, namely what we call “potential spaces” (Ferretti, Quattrini, Di Leo, 2021): abandoned, forgotten containers or open spaces (Berger, 2006) and, usually, perceived as residuals of the city (Gangemi, 2019). The research on field, combined with online data collection and the essential help of local administrations, supported the identification of specific target groups and key actors. The store of data acquired led to the creation of a map of social innovators in the area, which proved precious for engaging these people in interviews and in the *co-design* processes. In particular, the interviews have been a key tool for understanding desiderata and necessities of those who live in the inner area, and they have been divided into three types: Expert, Actors and Citizens Interviews. Thanks to the stakeholder analysis and the different meetings with the people who live in the ABPA, we finally tried to understand the needs of the inhabitants and of the city, and then hypothesise meta-projects based on them.

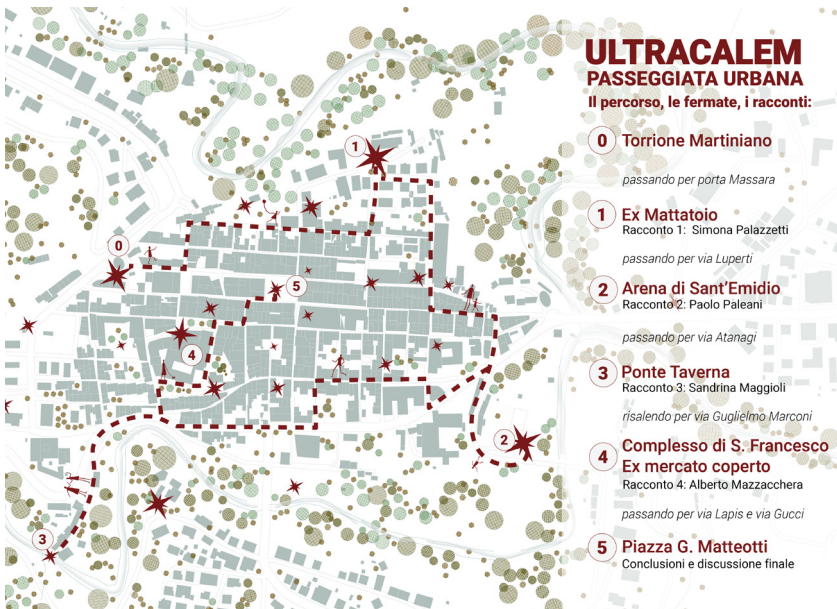
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Map of the built heritage identified in the Appennino Basso Pesarese e Anconetano area and classification in production, nature, infrastructure and settlements. Study of its values and risks, its vulnerability and vibrancy through a transcalar and relational approach. Elaboration by M. Ferretti, B. Di Leo, 2021



Classification of the interviews realized within the RESETtling APPennines research project.  
Elaboration by B. Di Leo, 2022



Route map of the urban walk in Cagliari. The itinerary, the stops, the tales. Activities realised with the project ULTRACALEM. The Cagliari of the Future. Elaboration by B. Di Leo, 2022

# Design Results

## CO-DESIGN WORKSHOPS

*Co-design workshops* are one of the tools used by researchers to address the *wicked problems* (Rittel, H.W.J., Webber, M. M., 1973) of the selected inner area.

For example, for the *B4R* project, the *co-design* was applied in Sassoferrato, in the Italian central Apennine. Here, the final meta-projects result from the dialogues with the community: the researchers first listened to the citizens and to the local stakeholders (Ferretti, M., Di Baldassarre, M. G., Rigo, C., 2022) involved in round tables; then they used the gathered information to produce projects and territorial strategies on the topics of mobility, natural resources and reuse of the abandoned industrial heritage. Finally public discussions were opened to envisage alternative futures for the architectures and the territory.

In the Cagli *co-design workshop* citizens and selected local actors have been involved in the discussion of 4 main topics that emerged from a SWOT analysis and a “needs analysis” conducted by researchers: regeneration of the historic centre, risk management, infrastructural connections and mobility, public space and participation. The next step will be an urban walk to (re)discover the “potential spaces” and to involve more citizens, engaging them also with new digital and immersive technologies. These approaches initially contribute to increase the awareness of the place by the community, its ability to network and care for the territory. They become an opportunity to co-think the reactivation of “potential spaces” (Ferretti, Quattrini, Di Leo, 2021).

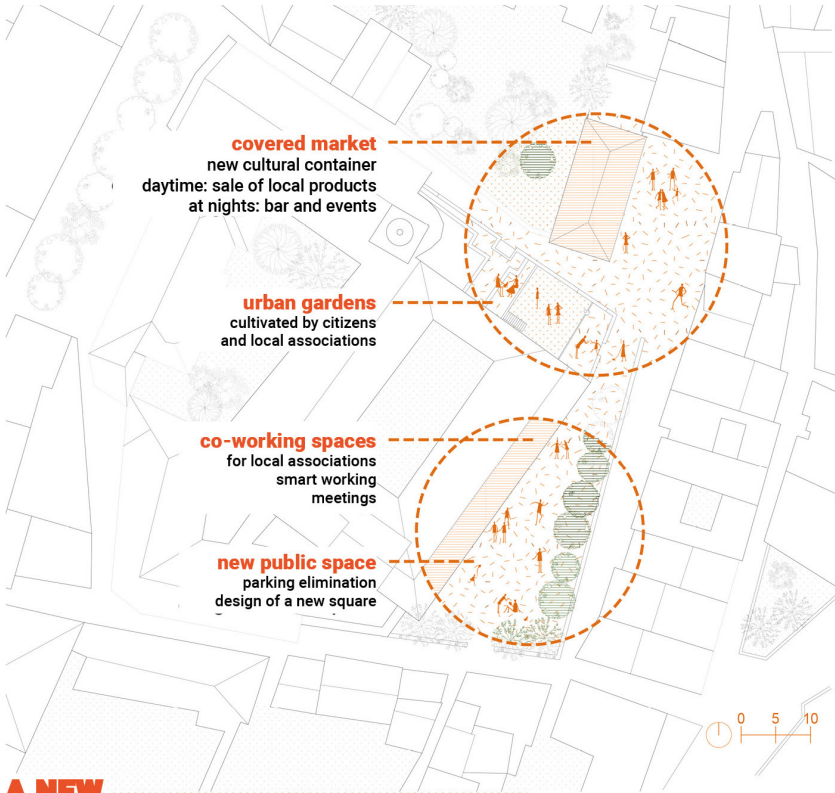


This helps to address common goals towards the enhancement of the city and to set strategic priorities at the inter-communal level. In the framework of the research on the marginal territory of the central Apennine, the analysis, the interpretation and the dialogues have merged into the co-design process and have resulted in meta-projects on urban and landscape contexts.



Filoferrato. 5-sense mobility for the Sentino Creative Park. Outcome of the co-design workshop in Sassoferrato. Elaboration by B. Lino (coordinator), M. Mengoni, B. Di Leo, M. Pasquali, A. Barreca, C. Andreani, L. Moretti. ©Branding4Resilience, 2020-2023

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### A NEW CULTURAL CONTAINER FOR THE CITY !

exhibitions,  
conferences,  
cineforum, fairs  
festivals, concerts  
KM 0 market  
bar, restaurant  
workshops  
shows



Meta-project for Piazza Garibaldi, Cagliari. Result of interviews and dialogues with the local administration. Ideas used by the administration to participate in a Regional call for obtain public funds. Elaboration by B. Di Leo, 2022

## META-PROJECTS

Although the design project is continuously intertwined between investigation and proposal and it involves aesthetic and beauty values, which are difficult to assess through indicators or 'scientific' criteria, it is through it that the researcher can make comparative hypotheses, asking questions and developing complex solutions, through the continuous weaving between problem and solution in an iterative process of analysis, understanding and design (Thomsen and Tamke, 2009).

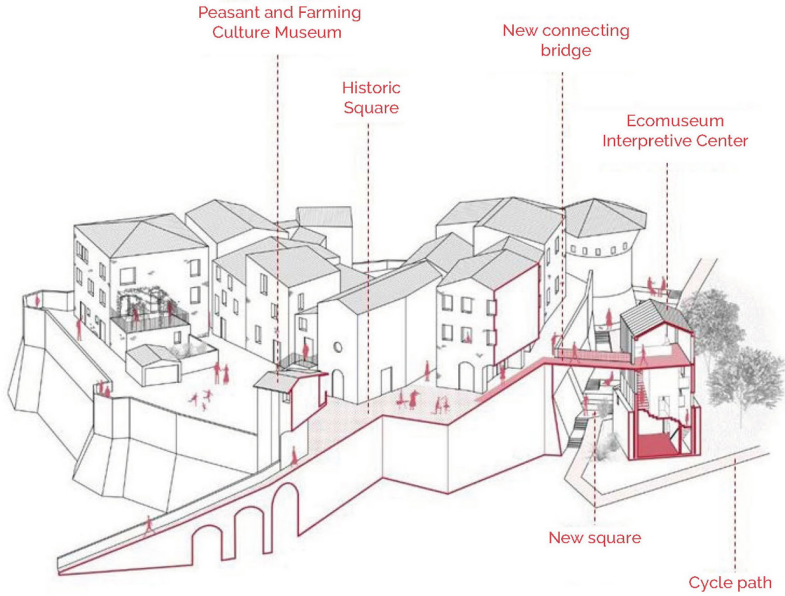
In the research conducted on the Apennine area, the architectural design project was performed on paradigmatic cases such as former industrial buildings or open public spaces or riverbanks.

The synthetical and intuitive approach typical of design was a tool to explore and investigate the inherent and specific characters of the areas.

Design highlighted some pattern conditions that are repeated in the territory. The iteration made the approach more systematic and transferable even though, clearly, every design project is a different one and it is developed for a specific context. Yet, the elements highlighted through the explorative designs managed to become effective examples of intervention or to extract specific issues of the territory. Designers use "solution-focused" strategies while traditional science applies a problem-solving approach. Scientists use analysis, whereas architects utilize design, namely they seek for various different solutions until they have evidenced the one that is possibly the most promising one. In this case, "prospective solutions can even be generated without any research", and designers could just operate by



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The ecomuseum of agrarian historical landscape. Recycling strategies for the creation of an interpretive center in Lorello.  
Elaboration by L. Marconi, with M. Ferretti and B. Di Leo for Branding4Resilience - UNIVPM, 2022

synthesis, collecting previous conducted research and synthesizing it into a design proposal (Swann, 2002).

For example, several meta-projects have been developed in the towns of Loretello, Palazzo and Cagli, born from the need to reactivate abandoned spaces designed for citizens, but also capable of stimulating and regularising tourism, which today is particularly problematic for these areas: often completely absent, in the summers it invades the town without rules, making them unlivable for the citizens who live there.

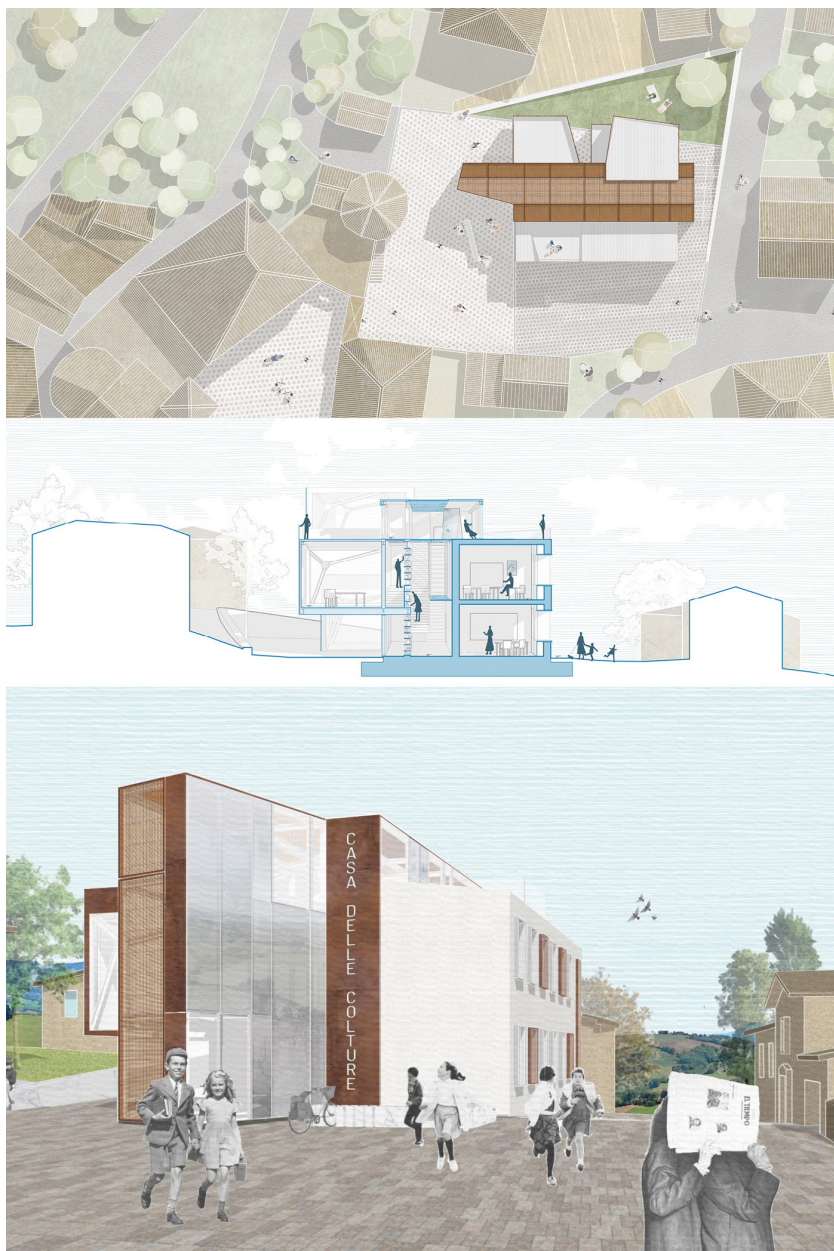
Therefore, the proposals contribute to triggering positive dynamics in the identified places, proposing infrastructures that are useful above all to the community.

For both Loretello and Palazzo, the project is based on the administration's desire to establish an Ecomuseum of the Historic Agrarian Landscape. The strategy focuses both on strengthening sustainable mobility and the accessibility of the villages but also on the reuse of the abandoned built heritage. In particular, the Church of the Madonna del Fosso is transformed into the gateway to the Ecomuseum, maintaining the old church shell and inserting a new volume to create an exhibition space.

On the other hand, in the former Palazzo school, the idea is to design a Casa delle Colture: a multidisciplinary hub for the training of new professional figures related to the protection and conservation of the historical agrarian landscape. The use of the existing structure with the addition of new volumes allows the creation of spaces for workshops and exhibitions, providing new opportunities for the community.

Meanwhile, the meta-project for Cagli provides both a

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The *Casa delle Colture* at Palazzo di Arcevia: plan, perspective section and view of the new public spaces for artistic and agricultural formation.  
Elaboration by L. Moretti, with M.Ferretti and B. Di Leo for Branding4Resilience - UNIVPM, 2022

new functional network for the “potential spaces” and the strengthening of connections between the historic centre and the rivers, with the creation of a river park. The former monastery of St. Francesco is instead transformed into Community House, a new cultural and tourist centre, provided with educational spaces, recreational areas, accommodation and artisan production that would improve the quality of life of the inhabitants and allow the flow of new tourists.

In all three examples, the reactivation of the area takes place through a trans-scalar design, which not only deals with both the territory and the built heritage, but also with the social, political and economic impacts that the intervention may cause, each time confronting the needs and urgencies expressed by the administration and the citizens.

## Conclusion

The relationships engaged with municipalities try to show how the university can support them in achieving more sustainable and resilient futures, demonstrating the importance of investing in the existing built and natural heritage, but also in human capital and local expertise.

The meta-projects that have emerged and will emerge from the experiences described above cannot be built by researchers-designers, as the Italian regulation doesn't allow it. Yet, they produce unexpected impulses, lead to new collaborations and become ideas that, as it has already happened, administrations can use in calls for tender to obtain

funds for new interventions. In these complex and multi-layered contexts, going beyond the mandate means exploring new fields of possibilities for architecture by making things happen together with the people that inhabit, or re-inhabit, this remote but central territory.

The researchers work on and with the territory, transfer their knowledge and competences and aim to produce short, medium and long-term impacts, using the architectural design (Amirante, 2018) as a re-activating tool to change the physical contexts they are working on (Wakkary, 2005). In the practice of co-designing public places, indeed, the architectural design is not only a trans-scalar and multi-disciplinary research tool (Pietrzyk, 2022), but it is also a means to activate new networks of culture and knowledge, and thus produce new meanings for the territory: “making things to make sense of things” (Jungnickel, 2018). Moreover, the researcher-designer, in making things with and on the territory, especially in small towns such as those investigated, must handle the fundamental and fragile relationship with local actors, avoiding top-down solutions that are unrelated to the context and favouring instead new collaborative practices. This finally allows design projects to stay open and flexible and to adapt to different emerging conditions or requests of the administrations. The level of ‘abstraction’ of the meta-projects developed by researchers, which is a mandatory condition for universities who are not entitled to sign and realize projects, is precisely the third mission of the academia.

Especially in inner areas, where lack of infrastructures, economic resources and technical competences are often serious issues to be tackled, universities are committed to



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A transcalar strategy for Cagli: from the river, to the city to the *Community House* and interior view of the recovery of the former St. Francesco convent. Elaboration by S. Marinelli, with M.Ferretti, B. Di Leo and G. Mondaini for Branding4Resilience - UNIVPM, 2022

relate to the territory with knowledge transfer and support, by accompanying small cities into processes of transformation that enable them to face the complexities and challenges of an uncertain future.

The design results were useful for the research to test and reframe some contextual approaches to specific territorial issues and to propose more effective solutions both at the strategic and architectural scale.

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