The Role of Beauty in the Sustainable Regeneration of the Historical Centres: The Upper Town of Bergamo

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Abstract. The ongoing debate on new urban planning and regeneration strategies is crucial for the future of old towns, which are still struggling with significant obstacles. This is an important issue that involves the political class, professionals, and citizens, and requires more investigation. Due to market pressures and insufficient regulations, historic cities in today's world are at risk from both old and new dangers. The growth of mass tourism has resulted in depopulation, the loss of traditional production and commercial functions, and consumption phenomena. A generalized trend which if, on the one hand, sees the industry of tourism as an important driving force for the development of historic centres, on the other hand induces negative consequences that careful planning should be able to counteract. This paper focuses on *Città Alta*, the upper town of Bergamo. The city was once unhealthy until Luigi Angelini's Recovery Plan was implemented, which allowed it to adapt to modern life without losing its identity. In 2017, UNESCO recognized its fortifications as part of a series of transnational sites that includes the *Serenissima*'s most comprehensive and innovative defence networks. Since then, tourism highly increased and, at the same time, the Municipality of Bergamo developed new conservation and valorisation projects, starting from the idea that both social inclusion and beauty in the built environment would help in promoting health, well-being, and sustainable growth. A substantial question that the authors intend to discuss.

Keywords: architecture/urban regeneration · cultural heritage conservation and valorisation · sustainable cities

1 Introduction

In Italy, urban planning policies – also by virtue of the provisions set out in the recent National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) and from a public interest perspective – are increasingly focused on reducing land consumption, regenerating existing building stock, and valuing sustainable architectural projects. In this context, historic centres are faced with daring challenges in a global framework that presents new problems and

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demands innovative answers. Solutions that need to be balanced between preservation and socio-economic valorisation, between the territorial government and cultural heritage laws [1]. The issue is highly complex and involves the public administration, the professionals in the sector, the social private associations, and citizens. A question that has already been the subject of great interest (as demonstrated by the countless meetings that have been organized in recent years), but still to be explored in greater depth, even though it is one of the topics that have shaped and characterized the Italian specialist debate during the second half of the 20th century and offered the greatest contribution to international urban planning.

The theme is rooted in ancient times and is connected to the history of architecture and restoration, transcending national borders. It then evolved slowly, within the framework of the constant and perhaps inevitable conflict between ancient and modern, of the contrast between old and new city, between conservation and renewal which has developed – without pause or solution – since the Renaissance [2]. The belief that in reading and narrating the past it is possible to rediscover the foundations for an increasingly dynamic and changing project for the present represents one of the great 'conquests' of modernity [3]. The maturation process towards the defence of the physical integrity of the historic building, its conservation and modification, was in fact the hypotheses of a difficult collective project of European origin, which unfolded and progressed through a series of contradictions and partial findings, as a cultural response to an urban planning problem still largely unresolved, indeed amplified by the violence of global environmental and social emergencies.

Today, we cannot avoid talking about urban regeneration, promoting policies and design strategies not limited to the safeguarding but also attentive to the redevelopment and enhancement of the physical and social heritage of historic cities and smaller historic centres [4]. While the conservation of architectural heritage plays a fundamental role in the development of sustainable territorial policies, for a long time, urban planning has not been able to update its tools, making them finally able to interface and interact between local and national scales, as needed. As other European countries, Italy has not always been able to define sustainable policies, capable of developing 'resilience', in combination between tradition and innovation, for the management of an urban sector affected by sudden and substantial social and economic transformations; integrated and coherent policies and actions, aimed at protecting, first and foremost, the residential use and production functions as indispensable factors for maintaining the identity and character of the places.

Today, market pressures are threatening historic cities with both old and new hazards, and existing regulations are not always able to provide adequate solutions. A widespread trend towards population aging and depopulation, the loss of traditional productive and commercial functions, and, in many cases, serious phenomena of consumption and degradation due to tourism, can be observed. If on the one hand, tourism is "the most important industry of this new century" [5] and therefore an essential factor of growth and development, both at an economic and employment level, on the other hand, it can induce significant negative consequences when the dynamic forces that fuel it are not adequately managed. Over the last thirty years, Italy has witnessed a growth in so-called urban

cultural tourism[1], undoubtedly linked to the process of recovery of the historic centres of cities, the valorisation of cultural heritage and the diversification of cultural activities. A recent study by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) [7] provided an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon, highlighting how cultural tourism represents a fundamental pillar for the tourist attractiveness of the country. Among the eight categories identified, that of "cities with a cultural, historical, artistic and landscape vocation" includes 431 municipalities, distributed mainly in the Central-Northern regions and a little less in the South and on the Islands. Multi-vocation is a factor of tourist attractiveness at a territorial level, especially if cultural, historical, artistic and landscape characteristics are present among the multiple tourist vocations of a territory. According to the latest update of the "Survey on international tourism in Italy - 2022" conducted by the Bank of Italy, 2022 proved to be the year in which cultural holidays and holidays in cities of art were the main motivation holiday for foreigners in Italy [8].

However, the XXVI Edition of the Report on Italian Tourism 2022–2023 highlights that over 70% of international tourists for cultural holidays are concentrated in less than 1% of Italy's territory, i.e. in some areas mainly in the historic centres of a very large number restricted to cities of art, determining serious implications on the sustainability of the impacts of tourism. In this context, tourism appears to be a significant factor that is causing the population reduction and dispersion of large cities [9]. This phenomenon can produce major elements of conflict between the stable and temporary housing dimensions due to the increase in the prices of goods and services and, above all, of the real estate market, the gentrification of the commercial fabric, i.e. the disappearance of neighbourhood shops in favour of large brands and of commercial chains, heavily impacting the environment in terms of pollution and waste management.

The overtourism[2], i.e. that situation in which the impact of tourism exceeds the thresholds of physical, ecological, social, economic, psychological and/or political capacity, can have dangerous consequences in this sense, to the point of threatening the existence of destinations affected or potentially at risk, where tourism development is not adequately managed [12]. Risks that careful planning – based on a real knowledge of that heritage of tangible and intangible values, fabrics, textures, relationships, sensations, shapes, figures, materials, etc. that are inherent in our ancient sites – should be

[1] According to the definition adopted by the UN Tourism General Assembly, at its 22nd session (2017), the term cultural tourism implies "A type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience, and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination. These attractions/products relate to a set of distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional features of a society that encompasses arts and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries and the living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs and traditions" [6].

[2] In 2016, Skift media company specialized in research and marketing in the tourism sector created (and later trademarked) the word 'overtourism' [10]. Several definitions of 'overtourism' have emerged since. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 'overtourism' can be defined as "the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors experiences in a negative way". It is the opposite of 'responsible tourism' which is about using tourism to make better places to live in and better places to visit [11].

able to counteract. Through the case study of Città Alta in Bergamo, "mirror of national demographic dynamics" [13], this paper focuses on this problem, to highlight its multiple aspects, components, problematics, and possible solutions (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Bergamo: Lower city and, in the background, the Upper city (@authors).

2 The Upper City of Bergamo: A Valued Historical Centre

The original nucleus of Bergamo is located on a steep hill overlooking the vast plain below. Presumably built by the Ligurians – or more precisely by the Orobii as Pliny the Elder recalls in the third volume of its *Naturalis Historia* –, in 198 B.C., it was ruled by the Roman Empire. In 49 B.C., Caesar granted Roman citizenship to the inhabitants of Bergamo. The town was then re-founded on a regular layout cut orthogonally by two main arteries – the *cardo* and the *decumanus* – and numerous buildings were erected to testify to the presence and greatness of the Empire that will guide it for almost five centuries.

The existence of a fortification to protect the centre, probably dating back to the 1st century B.C., seems to be confirmed by some findings, including an important epigraph which describes the construction of two doors in the mighty surrounding wall [14]. Renovated and consolidated in several parts during the early Middle Ages due to numerous sieges, until the arrival of the Lombards who established a Duchy there in 569, the walls were later partially demolished in 904 when the city was invaded by the Hungarians and restored only later, when civil life moved towards the constitution of the free Municipality. Starting from the 13th century, Bergamo came under the control of the Visconti of Milan who fortified and assigning it the *forma urbis* which it would maintain until the year 1561. This date marked the start of the Venetian Senate's effort to construct a larger set of walls, which still form the monumental bulwark that surrounds the Upper city.

At the same time, if the development of Bergamo Alta remains very limited, the areas of the villages located downstream, along the main commercial and communication

routes, were crowded with new buildings. Between the end of the 15th century and the first half of the 16th century, the city saw its well-being increase thanks to the earnings received from Bergamo residents residing in Venice: greater wealth which inevitably translated into impressive new civil and religious building works [15]. Following the return of Austrian rule, the city experienced a period of great splendour, due to the development of new industrial activities and commerce. Thanks to a more widespread collective comfort, between 1825 and 1845, Bergamo witnessed a new phase of growth in building activity.

In the post-unification era, Bergamo committed itself to the construction of the new city. The urban layout was modernized: the new city centre was planned on the area of the ancient fair – which will be called *Piacentiniano* from the name of its designer, Marcello Piacentini [16] – and new public buildings were erected in the middle and flat areas, replacing those existing in the ancient city. As business, commerce, and administrative life moved to the Lower City, the Upper City was left with its unique and picturesque 'detached' appearance, which is still visible today. The masterplan for the new city of Bergamo was in fact unanimously appreciated, as it guaranteed the intangibility of the ancient one: "whoever wants to rediscover the intact appearance of an ancient Italian city goes up there" will write Roberto Papini celebrating the renewal intentions of the city [17].

As no further expansion was foreseen, in the 1930s a long period was inaugurated in the Upper Town aimed at remedying, through necessary public hygiene works, the state of decay and abandonment of many buildings in the neighbourhood. Luigi Angelini's recovery plan approved 'with honours' in 1934 by the Superior Council of Public Works, managed to implement the theories put forward by Gustavo Giovannoni on urban restoration, so much so that it received applause. Bergamo Alta therefore becomes the manifesto of a certain "sound, well-applied theory" [18], of a new vision of the historic centre that can be preserved and protected through targeted rehabilitation and restoration strategies.

The Angelini's Plan stands out, in fact, for surgical restoration interventions, the pertinent insertion of recognizable modern features, the meticulous study of conservative measures also extended to detailed elements, such as, for example, the signs of the shops. If Angelini carries out some demolition activities 'proper to his time', while opposing to the concept of isolation of the monument, he materializes an important project of urban design which "transcends the rigorous terms of rehabilitation building" [19]. His interventions involve creating new green spaces, designing furnishings and decorations, building stairways to connect existing differences in level, and reorganizing the city fabric, which was gutted by demolition campaigns during the 19th century.

The plan remained in force from 1934 to 1950 and was accompanied by new building interventions such as the construction of terraced houses designed by Giuseppe Pizzigoni, within the framework of the Fanfani Law on subsidized public housing. An intervention certainly to be praised as intended to promote new lifeblood in the ancient fabric, unlike others, such as the transformation that affected the bishop's seminary between 1962 and 1967, causing the almost complete demolition of the underlying historic building fabric and affecting the skyline of the Upper city. In the same period, Bergamo Alta endured a significant exodus of residents towards the suburbs which will cause the neglect of buildings and, therefore, the depreciation of real estate [20].

In the 70s, the weaker social classes were gradually expelled due to building speculation. Moreover, the tourism phenomenon will initiate a significant shift in the centre's liveability. The balance also favoured by the recovery plan of Luig Angelini thus begins to falter and with it that "character of almost continuous life" based on traditional relationships, on "the constant presence of families living in the same houses for long periods, the existence of various kinds of shops that had been operating for many decades [which] made people's acquaintances and almost daily exchanges natural" [21]. In line with the provisions of the general master plan drawn up by Giovanni Astengo and Luigi Dodi in 1969 and approved in 1972, which already included the recovery of the Upper Town among its seven objectives, in 1980 it was proposed by Sandro Angelini, Luigi's son, the *Piano particolareggiato di risanamento conservativo di Città Alta e Borgo Canale di Bergamo* (Detailed plan for the conservative restoration of Città Alta and Borgo Canale). The plan envisaged that, alongside the main function of the residence – also in consideration of the distance from the centre of management activities – vitalising components, such as schools, museums, activities, will be added progressively and without overpowering each other. Cultural and recreational.

Even the *Piano Particolareggiato di Riqualificazione di Città Alta* (Detailed Recovery Plan of Città Alta – PPRCA) edited by the engineer Diego Finazzi and the architect Gianluca Della Mea, with the consultancy of the architect Sergio Crotti in 2005, was based on the idea that the historic centre must play a role propulsive in the territorial context, implying that it would be able to resist the processes of homologation, gender stereotypes, housing standards, functional hybridization: "the upper city is called to claim and promote the differential factors, which represent its true originality and must therefore be protected as unrepeatable values, guaranteed of its unique role in the multipolar territorial system to which it refers" [13]. The PPRCA pursued an enhancement of the historic centre that was conceived not limited to "formulas of mere functionalization and passive conservation, to instead affirm the fertility of modifications, understood as integrations of the existing, in the various forms relevant to the stated objectives […] the historic centre of Bergamo [was] considered the place appointed to play an active and propulsive role within a complex territorial system" [13].

Although many of the excellent intentions pursued by a planning sequence of great importance (summarized here only in part) have produced encouraging results and an overall high resilience of Bergamo to the attacks of globalisation, the historic city in the last fifteen years has undergone great changes and today must manage new conditions, mainly linked to the development of tourism.

3 Tourism in Bergamo: Origins and Developments

The origins of tourism in the Bergamo area are mainly linked to mountain resorts such as Foppolo, Presolana and Selvino which were among the first ski destinations in Northern Italy in the post-war period. Between the 1950s and 1970s, during the economic boom, a process of new construction began in these areas which transformed the Bergamo valleys into holiday resorts and made them the second tourist centre at a regional level, after Milan, in terms of number of visitors [22].

Tourism in Bergamo, however, developed later and not proportionally to the potential of the place, although very precious from a historical-artistic point of view as well as

rich in traditions with deep roots. This was due to the strong industrial vocation linked to the tertiary sector of the city and its hinterland which did not initially consider tourism as a primary factor for local economic growth. The profound identity value and the attachment of the people of Bergamo to their historic centre have led them to consider *extra moenia* presences as a threat to a stability which, in a context of multiculturalism, would have been altered [23, 24]. The opening of the town to massive tourism is a recent event that is closely linked to the profound cultural, social, and economic changes of the new millennium. The locations that had attracted most flows in the past, such as mountain areas, had over time lost their attractiveness, and consequently their competitiveness, due to growing antagonism between destinations – even distant ones – that were now easily reachable and with a greater number of services at lower costs. Ineffective coordination between the public and private sectors was common in regional policies in the tourism sector until the 1990s, with few and sporadic initiatives often organized in a rented and independent-managed context.

A first change occurred with the creation, in 1997, of the Consortium for Tourist Promotion of the Bergamo area (today, the Agency for the Development and Tourist Promotion of the Province of Bergamo): a coordination body between the administrative institutions, the private sector and the small operators, aimed at promoting the potential of the Orobic province [25]. The aim was to convey the image of Bergamo as a city of Art and Culture, like Rome, Milan, Venice, Florence, and Naples. This marked the beginning of the season of major exhibitions which opened in 1998 with the event "Lorenzo Lotto: the restless genius of the Renaissance", which had 165,000 visitors and great critical success. In 2000, the exhibition "Caravaggio, light in Lombard painting" dedicated to the Bergamo painter Michelangelo Merisi was inaugurated and, a little later, the monographic exhibition "The Still Lifes of Evaristo Baschenis: the Music of Silence" was even exhibited at Metropolitan Museum of Art [26]. According to the Tourism Observatory of the Province of Bergamo, visitors to the city increased from less than 150,000 in 1992–2002 to over 550,000 in the decade 2002–2012.

At the same time, at a regional level, the project "UNESCO Sites: Leonardo's itineraries and tourist-cultural excellence" was launched with the aim of promoting knowledge of the then existing World Heritage sites. Lombardy was the region with the largest number of recognized sites (nine of the forty-seven in total on the national territory, today eleven out of fifty-nine) and Bergamo, with its 'Upper city and villages' was included in the Tentative List in 2006. The candidacy was not approved but the failure led, in 2012, to the establishment of the Terra di San Marco association to support a new proposal, this time contextualized in the more specific framework of the Venetian fortresses and within a serial site including eleven locations between Italy, Croatia and Montenegro. Expo Milano 2015 saw a significant process of internationalization and a significant increase in tourist flows. The great event, in addition to improving the image of the entire Region – associated with the concepts of development, progress and modernity – allowed a redevelopment process for Bergamo, first territorial and then urban, still underway.

The creation of new road infrastructures and the expansion of Orio al Serio airport – since 2014 the third most important airport, after Rome Fiumicino and Milan Malpensa, both for passenger traffic and for freight traffic – have made the city the 'Gateway to

Italy' giving it a strategic role within the network of connections between the peninsula and the rest of Europe. The city has been able to attract tourists thanks to this, but there are now actions needed to keep visitors and not denigrate Bergamo as just a transit spot.

4 The Caravaggio Airport and the Tourism Boom

The strong growth of air transport at the end of the last century and the nearby presence of the Caravaggio international airport of Orio al Serio, placed Bergamo at the centre of the north-western Italian infrastructural connection system. The city, previously only affected by road traffic along the route between Venice and Milan, has become, in a few years, the main access hub of the integrated connection network (air, road and rail) of Lombardy-Veneto. The airport's rapid growth has led to new economic development and renewed tourist demand, resulting in a profound transformation of both peripheral areas and the historic centre.

The Bergamo airport was built in 1939 for military purposes, at the same time as Hitler's armed invasion of Germany against Poland. Its conversion into a civil airport took place at the beginning of 1970, as a secondary landing strip for Milan Linate. Its traffic, limited to a few destinations, mostly national, has been the pretext several times for a possible closure, which fortunately never occurred. In the following 90s, the opening of a hub for freight traffic (chosen by DHL, UPS, and Lufthansa Cargo as their sorting centre for Southern Europe) favoured the relaunch of the air station; however, the strong increase in passengers will be determined by some low-cost airlines who will choose it as their main base in Italy (Fig. 2).

The Caravaggio airport was the driving force of the economic development of the entire Bergamo area, especially in the period of strong financial crisis following 2008. Tourism development has made it possible to stem the recession in the craft, commerce, and industry sectors. The city of Bergamo, interested in previous years by small flows restricted to business tourism, limited to the lower city, has therefore readjusted its structures to welcome an increasingly higher number of visitors. A late and forced development which also involved the Upper Town, which until then had received little attention from visitors who were not very interested in the artistic and cultural heritage of the ancient settlement. A process that was more immediate than desired, given the socio-cultural profile of the Bergamo citizen, strongly attached to traditions, and disinclined to accept 'external visitors' because they would potentially disturb the existential balance and/or because considered a possible threat for their own traditions.

Despite everything, the inhabitants have altered their habits and adjusted their houses, particularly in the Upper Town, to establish new lodging structures that were not present before. Until a few years ago, the historic city was devoid of hotels and the new ones recently built, of the extra-luxury category, are aimed at welcoming a certain niche market, which is however a minority in the context of presences in the city. Non-hotel accommodations were enhanced by the creation of bed and breakfast, or the renovation of large, elegant apartments divided into smaller real estate units for rental purposes. A necessity dictated both by the growing demand for temporary lodging for travellers, and by the opportunity to guarantee profits to residents, even though it may force them to move to other areas of the city.

Bergamo is today interested in leisure and cultural tourism which is characterized by a low average stay of tourists, in many cases daily, which has significantly decreased after the recognition of the Venetian Walls as a UNESCO site. In fact, the number of visitors – mainly national, although there is an increase in foreign presences – who stay in the city for only a few hours and 'spending little money' has raised [28].



Fig. 2. The "Caravaggio" airport in Orio al Serio, serving the city of Bergamo (@authors).

The inclusion of the fortified system on the World Heritage List has, in fact, led to a worrying enhance in the attractiveness of the Upper city, which is now almost unsustainable. Safeguarding policies must be able to govern the phenomenon to avoid the danger of the site being subjected to further transformation for tourist use (hotels, restaurants, or new garages) which could lead to the irreparable loss of its identity (Fig. 3).

5 The Adaptive Reuse of the Upper Town

The sustainability of the Upper Town has been significantly impacted by the recent surge in tourists. Here too, the past is exploited for economic purposes. Traveling has been transformed into a predatory animal by the advancement of transportation and communication technologies. Bed and breakfasts, apartments for rent for tourist use, or short-term rentals are replacing homes more and more because of regulatory ease in changing the intended use of property. A transformation that now appears irreversible, both due to the growing flows of visitors and a trend in the real estate market dominated by a strong demand for short-term accommodation, not for residential homes. The advent of the new digital tourist platforms, which have made rental negotiations quick and simple, has transformed the historic centre into a large widespread hotel which, to attract, needs to crystallize its image by making it an open museum. The city has become a work of art, with visitors enjoying it as a work of art to capitalize on its historical charm. It has become a sort of luxury dormitory for privileged tourists, then transforming the resident or common user into an increasing rarity [29].

Bergamo, the city of art, has therefore once again 'repudiated' the inhabitants of the most economically fragile groups – the new and the older generations, encouraged (or



Fig. 3. Bergamo Alta invaded by the tourists (@authors).

forced?) to give up their homes –, profoundly changing the social fabric. The reuse of the city has transformed the ancient spaces into hospitality structures and generated new activities with commercial typologies essentially useful to visitors (take-away pizzerias, ice cream parlours, craft breweries, etc.) and, again, in vintage shops and trendy bars, to the detriment of artisan shops and necessities aimed at satisfying the needs of the inhabitants. It is an eclectic panorama, almost devoid of character and memory, that assimilates it to other Italian towns [30, 31]. The new shops are, in fact, alien to the soul of the historic centre and the few historic premises remaining – such as the Caffè del Tasso or the Pasticceria Cavour – have been partly deprived of their essence and made a tourist icon designed to celebrate the memory of the past.

The function performed by neighbourhood businesses is fundamental for the sustainability of the weakest social fabric, the elderly for example for whom the hardship is increased by not having their own means of transport. A few years ago, the last shoemaker closed its doors (in 1976 there were five), the surviving food and/or fruit and vegetable shops are only three, transformed into retailers of luxury goods outside the area or supermarkets whose goods on display are mainly those that the passing guest might need. L'Alimentari is the name of a commercial activity in Piazza Vecchia which, although selling cured meat, cheese, and local products to take away, is essentially a restaurant that is too expensive for most people. Bakeries are places that basically sell slices of pizza rather than bread and it is no longer possible, within the walls, to find a plumber, a mechanic, an electrician, or a painter. If a resolution of the City Council of

December 2017[3] defined a new regulation to safeguard the *décor* in the areas of historical interest in the Upper Town, prohibiting the opening of some types of commercial establishments – fast food, self-service, sex shops and massage centres – this has not prevented some trendy or clearly tourism-oriented substitutions.

The neighbourhood seems, in fact, to have definitively taken on the appearance of a luxury district for the wealthy classes only, to the detriment of its popular dimension; an analysis based on demographic trend data which highlights how the population residing within the walls is made up of fewer 'historical inhabitants' and more 'foreign' healthy people that decided to invest in the Upper city, solely for speculative purposes or to spend the weekend.

Some places, once emblematic, such as the ancient Il Giardinetto restaurant – with the characteristic pergola and the bowling green designed by Luigi Angelini – located in the historic Piazza Lorenzo Mascheroni previously known as Piazza Nova, today experience a new season thanks to their reuse in a tourist key. Over the last thirty years, the old restaurant has become the San Lorenzo hotel. Once a small structure, in 2019, it has undergone a major expansion and renovation to become a luxurious 5-star hotel. The area of intervention is essentially an archaeological site, a garden next to the Chiesa del Carmine, on whose land lie, like the members of a decomposed body, the fragments of historical architectures that have overlapped through time, from the 6th century B.C. to the late Republican era, from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. The works revealed a portion of the Roman city and the architect decided to free the ruins from the earth, by isolating them like an archaeologist in an excavation. They then obtained a basement at the garden level, to host the breakfast room, the SPA, a meeting room, services, on which the new project is based: a new body is superimposed to the fragments of the past, in the aim of giving them back dignity and restoring a sense of memory. However, this place is no accessible to everyone, but has become the extraordinary setting for the gourmet restaurant Hostaria. Nevertheless, the case of Sant'Agata former prison, for many years forgotten and neglected, has had a different fate, demonstrating a trend that is fortunately increasingly widespread. Founded on ancient defensive walls from the 10th century, it became a monastery of the Theatine fathers in the 17th century. Converted into a house of detention from 1802 until its definitive suppression in the 1990s, it is today owned by the Municipality. The Maite Social Promotion Association, which was founded in 2010 by a group of friends with the purpose of encouraging cultural, social, musical, theatrical, food, and wine events in the city of Bergamo is taking care and using its spaces. The project, which rests on solid roots, has taken on an increasingly intergenerational character, collecting adhesions both among young people (with a creative, playful, and proactive role), and between adults (who use space as a place of aggregation in its more classical conception) given the articulated and diversified programming. The association has always dreamed of restoring this location to offer new services to the city, but there has been a dearth of funds and investors. The city has been involved in a long debate over the transformation of the structure into a new luxury hotel in recent years, but luckily, the municipal administration did not find a consensus on this path. In recent times, a

[3] This provision was legitimized by the legislative decree no. 222 of 25 November 2016, which allows mayors to intervene to regulate commercial activities, meaning product categories, within particularly delicate situations from an environmental, monumental, and artistic point of view.

project was approved that will allow the complex to be used for social housing, while providing for the maintenance of cultural spaces and the creation of a prison museum to safeguard the value of testimony. Thanks to PNRR funds, 15 apartments will therefore be built, mostly studios, with subsidized rent, and intended, preferably, for young people and couples.

6 The New Strategies Implemented by the Municipality and Local Actors for the Sustainable Valorisation of Upper Town

Bergamo's historic centre is under threat, just like many other cities of art. It is fighting against the consequences of a dangerous trend towards museumification, which risks turning it into a picturesque location that is popular with tourists but not with residents. We can observe a certain drift towards market demands, towards the spectacularization of its rich history and stunning architecture, but mostly for economic purposes. Its community is always looking for strategies and tools to ensure its genuine vitality. In this sense, the Association for the Upper Town and the Hills is battling to prevent its transformation into an element that is alien to its origins and context.

Salvatore Settis reminds us that if Venice ever dies, it will be above all due to the oblivion of itself, because every city "is a living narration of its own history, but also the face and translation in stone of the people who inhabit it, preserve it and transform it" [9, 32]. Venice therefore represents the archetype of the destiny of many historic Italian cities which are emptied of their inhabitants and their intrinsic peculiarities to flatten themselves on a standardized modernity, reducing them to a mere tourist-hotel function. And, in this sense, Bergamo's Upper Town also runs the risk of being annihilated by that monoculture of tourism that enriches a few, impoverishes many, and destroys urbanity. For some time, many have underlined the usefulness of bringing families made up of young couples, children, and elderly people back to the Upper Town and thus recovering that lost dimension of simple conviviality and equally 'normality'.

The hypothesis that receptive use is unfairly competing with classic residence is confirmed by incontrovertible statistical data. The impossibility of attracting the middle-lower classes to encourage the necessary social turnover, at the same time, favours the obsolescence of homes, if not their total abandonment, resulting in a large presence of disused buildings, both public and private. Numerous prominent city figures have accused tourism of being the cause of the depopulation of the ancient, fortified village but perhaps few ask themselves whether ordinary people still want to live in the Upper Town; if they want to live in a city profoundly different from the most recent expansions, certainly more picturesque but infinitely less practical, or if they want to live in properties which, due to size and finishes, are far removed from the comforts of modern homes. And again, is it true that these 'replacement' activities – recent but now prevalent – are of no benefit to the local community?

The most recent activities related to tourism are perhaps not only something to be condemned but deserve to be further regulated; to be included in a flow control and coordination plan aimed at the regeneration of the ancient village aimed at counteracting its isolation, based on continuous and proactive assumptions over time. A plan which, based on an accurate knowledge of the place, does not cancel the present nor the past

but which allows, through appropriate rebalancing actions, to ferry the Upper Town towards a more conscious and evolved future. The policies developed out by the current administration goes in this direction: preventing the depopulation and distortion of the Upper Town, through the construction of a network of relationships between subjects of different nature, which places culture at the centre of every reflection. Culture defines the identity of a city and its community, has a strong social and economic dimension and is therefore an essential element in the processes of urban development and regeneration.

A work that goes hand in hand with the effort made by the local University, which was founded in 1968 and settled in the Upper Town precisely to become an engine of development, and has gradually broadened its horizons, confirming its presence in the ancient centre: from the first headquarters in Piazza Vecchia, in the Palazzo del Podestà which dominates the main square of Città Alta, to the locations in via dei Caniana, Sant'Agostino, via Pignolo, which radiate the university into the city and make up a system of campuses. The Aula Magna of the university is none other than the former Church of Sant'Agostino, the first architectural element, dating back to the 13th century, that you encounter upon arriving in the Upper Town and skirting the Venetian walls.

Together with the aforementioned project for Sant'Agata, it is worth remembering the "Housing first" social inclusion project of the Municipality of Bergamo, which for the hospitality of people in conditions of serious marginalization, reserved five apartments owned by the municipal administration in Città Alta, (three of the premises are located along via Gombito, one in via Porta Dipinta and the last in via Solata). The choice of the municipal administration aims to strengthen the social mix of the historic centre, in which the municipal houses are destined to have a fundamental role. In the Upper Town, 103 families currently live in properties owned by the Municipality of Bergamo, for a total of 164 people. In addition to those in "Housing first", another five apartments are being assigned for next year, thus offering a further contribution to a process of support and social reintegration.

Another advantageous example of culturally based regeneration is that concerning the former Carmine convent. The complex, built in the second half of the 1300s, was long ignored and in a state of abandonment. It was restored by the municipal administration in the years 2010–2013. Since 2015, work has begun to reopen the covered access to the monastic complex, finally revealing to the city a monument which had remained close for more than fifty years. Between 2015 and 2016 the Tascabile Theatre of Bergamo (TTB), in collaboration with the municipal administration, gave life to the project of cultural recovery and valorisation of the Monastery, starting from the idea that the value of the Carmine is not constituted only by its material data, but also by the set of immaterial characteristics that characterize it and identify it culturally. Over the course of its long stay at Carmine, the TTB has fully integrated with the place, with its history, its nature, its peculiar privacy, dedicating time, and care to make it correspond to the common vision of the city: that of space to be dedicated to art and culture.

Since 2015 the cloister has been home to the international and multidisciplinary summer festival "Arcate d'arte" (consonances of theatre, culture, and art). Its activities are composed and organized for an open square model, a catalyst element within the life context of the Upper Town capable of producing political, educational, and artistic involvement of citizens. That of Carmine can be considered a successful model because

it was based on the idea that the new functions to be assigned to the building could be the answer to citizens' needs. The building has actually become a link between space and community: an innovative public-private partnership that has produced a concrete and tangible regeneration of the urban fabric.

These activities are fully included in the provision of new *Piano di Governo del Territorio* (territorial government plan – PGT) adopted by the Municipality of Bergamo with resolution of the Municipal Council n. 59 of 16 October 2023. The PGT collects the objectives to be achieved in the municipal area in three themes: Attractive Bergamo, Sustainable Bergamo, Inclusive Bergamo. These are the strategic lines from which planning for the city's future begins, translating into rules, a vision which, also and above all for the Upper city, sees culture and beauty as a driving element.

7 Bergamo Brescia Italian Capital of Culture 2023

The idea that culture is a driving force for the development of European identity, capable of increasing citizens' sense of belonging to a single large community "state", matured in Europe at the beginning of the 80s of the last century. On June 3, 1985, the European Commission designated Athens as the initial 'European City of Culture' to honour Greek minister Melina Mercouri who started the initiative. A fund was set up in the EU budget to finance the organization of annual events aimed at strengthening both the international image of a united Europe and the relations between EU countries. Every year, from 1985 to 1999, a remarkably deserving city was chosen as the venue for the event to enhance the historical and artistic heritage and cultural traditions of a particular region. The formula remained unchanged until 2000 when a shift rule was introduced to ensure visibility for each country, and the designated locations were increased to two (they were called 'Capitals' instead of 'Cities'). The title was first granted to Florence in 1986, followed by Bologna in 2000, Genoa in 2004, and Matera in 2019.

The Minister of Cultural Heritage, Dario Franceschini, in 2015 – on the presentation of candidacies for the 2019 European Capital of Culture won by the city of Matera – established the 'Italian Capital of Culture'. A national declination, already in place in other countries, of the prestigious European title. The five cities that did not reach the European goal (Ravenna, Siena, Cagliari, Lecce, and Perugia) were the first Italian capitals; then Mantua in 2016, Pistoia in 2017, Palermo in 2018, Parma in 2020 (postponed in 2021 due to the pandemic), Procida in 2022, Bergamo and Brescia in 2023. The title will go to Pesaro in 2024, Agrigento in 2025 and L'Aquila in 2026 (in 2019 the award was not given).

Eight years after the program's launch, the General Secretariat of the Ministry of Culture has initiated a study to examine the effects on the territories of the winning cities. Cultural interventions' impact was evaluated using methods that measured cultural participation, social and economic development, and event management policies, both during and after. The first results, which were recently published in a synthesis report, will serve as the basis for new guidelines for constructing future projects (Fig. 4). The document demonstrates that even with the significant efforts made by individual cities, the long-term outcomes have not always been satisfactory [33]. The annual appointment inflates the title and reduces the time needed to prepare a program that cannot just be a

list of events, but a strategic plan capable of initiating processes of change in the long term.

For the purpose of this study, it appears necessary to focus specifically on the Bergamo Brescia Italian Capital of Culture 2023 project, that was born in July 2020 during the dramatic COVID-19 pandemic, with the aim of giving a sign of hope and relaunching. A necessary moment of beauty to believe in a possible rebirth through the conscious choice to invest in culture. The project was a recognition of Bergamo's historic, artistic, and cultural heritage, as well as a testament to the capacity of a place to revitalize and plan for the future. A few months after its conclusion, the economic impact analysis is indicating a positive outcome of the event. The Upper city of Bergamo has hosted over a million visitors with an increase in the hotel sector of 29.5% and in the non-hotel sector (bed and breakfasts, holiday homes and tourist rentals) of even 53.2%. Very high numbers but, unfortunately, characterized by a very low average value of overnight stays/arrivals (only 1,8): an indicator of very short and concentrated stays during public holidays and weekends. These are unflattering values for the surrounding territory with an increase much lower than expected due, perhaps, to a lack of extra-urban public transport. Even the spending of each tourist, concentrated mostly in Bergamo Alta and in the city centre, although it increased in percentage, was much less than the increase in attendance; the rise in costs, and therefore in prices, has led to a general reduction in consumption in shops, clubs and restaurants, typical characteristics of mass low-cost tourism [34].

However, from a social and cultural impact the results were excellent thanks to the project's ability to reconcile important events with the small activities carried out by cultural businesses in the area. The major events attracted large numbers and allowed the city's brand to be launched. Many of them have made it possible to give continuity to already existing projects, such as the exhibition "The Walls in History: treasures of a Renaissance fortress city", which with 45,000 visitors, narrated the construction of the Walls from its origins. The exhibition was one of the stages of "PanoramaMura", a project of the Municipality of Bergamo which since 2018 has been dealing with the valorisation of the UNESCO title to build widespread awareness of the role of Bergamo within the defensive system of the Republic of Venice.

The local communities expressed their specificities through bottom-up activities that were embodied by the history and personality of this place through small events. Participatory planning allowed local realities to tell their story and enhance themselves within a single large container, making events possible [35].

The creation of shared transversal actions and the establishment of a coordination network between institutions and cultural operators (associations, non-profit organizations, etc.) represented the most innovative aspect. There was unanimous recognition of the good quality of the events, their ability to be widespread and involve different audiences, and their joint coordination of a broad and varied cultural offering. But some critical issues were linked to large events in the need to also include trashier proposals to have the squares full of people and provide an image of the city as alive and internationalized with a commodification of culture to the advantage of 'lesser quality' tourism: globalization dynamics that made it possible to finance the program, but which are not sustainable in environmental, sustainability and public health terms.

The challenge is now to keep the network of cultural actors active in the long term so that it would be sustainable and of high quality, focusing on smaller actions aimed at a cultured and local public capable of impacting the lives of people with consistency over time and improving their quality of life.

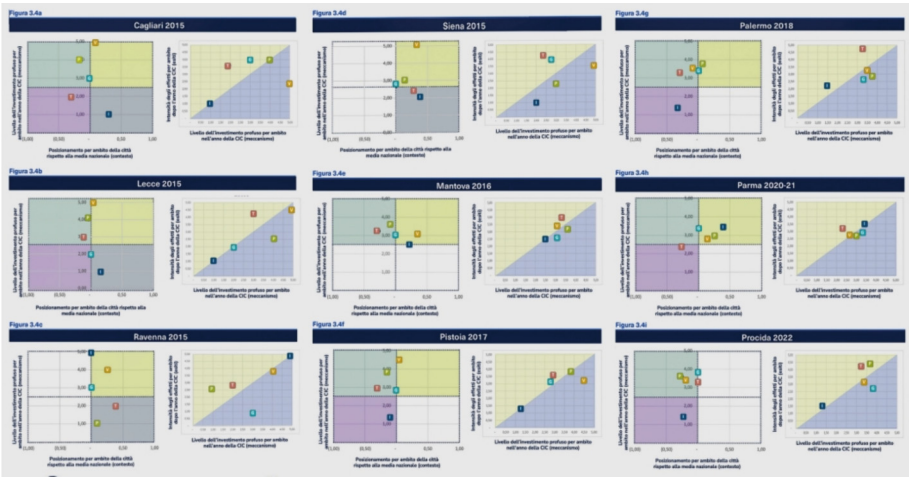


Fig. 4. Impact analysis of cultural development for the Italian Capitals of Culture 2015–22 [33].

8 Conclusions

The Upper city of Bergamo, thanks to an exceptional cultural heritage and a series of favourable infrastructural contingencies, has transformed in a few years into one of the great Italian destinations for cultural tourism. This has created a series of problems typical of the cities of art, subject to phenomena of congestion and loss of identity, that have required the establishment of policies and measures to address visitors' growth without negatively impacting on both the identity of place and the life of its inhabitants or causing the destruction of the physical, economic, and sociocultural environment.

Historic-artistic monuments and buildings alone are not sufficient to constitute a tourist attraction, but to become such they must be accompanied by an attribution of meanings that makes them authentic and unique in the eyes of the visitor [36]. To allow tourism to truly represent a sustainable resource over time and not a destructive weapon, it is necessary to implement strategies aimed at establishing a correct and balanced interaction between residents and tourists, to develop the city to fit with the residents' needs and desires, to regularly monitor the perception of local communities towards tourism and promote the value of the sector among residents.

In this sense, the Municipality of Bergamo has focused on culture and beauty, building over the years, virtuous partnerships between public bodies and private entities for the management of spaces and the assignment of resources, aimed at preventing important

transformations of the social fabric of its ancient historic centre and making it grow in terms of relationships and well-being, together with (and not despite) tourism.

The latest statistics on the number of residents appear to be comforting: Città Alta is slowing down depopulation and will stand at 2691 inhabitants in 2023, 74 more than the previous year. A trend that we hope will remain unchanged over time and that will also see it flourish again in the Upper town, the *beauté de l'ordinaire*!

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