Participatory Strategies for Supporting Decision Making in Cultural Heritage Adaptive Reuse Interventions

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Abstract. Participation is a multifaceted process that has become increasingly popular in projects and scenarios where the needs of the community have to be included in the decision-making process. In the context of cultural heritage management, these approaches are essential to ensure that the perspectives of all stakeholders are reflected in the proposed strategies. This paper traces the participatory process employed in the design of new functions for Villa Carpeneto, a historic building in the metropolitan area of Turin, Italy. The objective was to involve local stakeholders in order to facilitate social learning and improve the legitimacy and effectiveness of the decision-making process.

To explore possible scenarios for the reuse, the study adopted an integrated approach that combined several steps. It started with a historical review and an examination of the broader territorial context. This was followed by a participatory phase involving the local community. First, a workshop was organized to open a dialogue with local stakeholders. Later, a questionnaire was distributed to collect more structured feedback on possible future uses from residents. The findings highlight how involving communities in the decision-making process can support the sustainable reuse of heritage sites and strengthen the long-term value of shared planning.

Keywords: Participatory Planning · Cultural Heritage · Decision-making · Reuse

1 Introduction

The notion of participation is a multifaceted and open-ended concept, with a number of meanings and interpretations, that spans from public engagement to direct involvement in decisions [1]. Within this framework, participatory processes have become increasingly popular and have been embedded into research and project activities [2]. These processes have the potential to act as a bridge between global governance frameworks, national

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and regional objectives, and local realities [3]. This would ensure the development of inclusive and equitable strategies that are both practical and sensitive to territorial issues. They can be also an effective method of preventing "top-down" approaches that ignore context, leading to more relevant and sustainable outcomes [4].

The interest on this topic is also testified by the numerous studies that have investigated how stakeholders are involved [5–9]. Additionally, several authors have specifically advocated for more participatory approaches to better reflect the needs and viewpoints of stakeholders [10–12]. The inclusion of stakeholders in decision-making processes has the aim to increase social learning and trust-building, which should improve decision-makers' comprehension and application of stakeholders' perspectives and objectives [2].

There is now a large body of research on the subject, which attempts to consider stakeholder participation at different stages of the process and using different methods [13, 14]. Stakeholders' participation makes it possible to obtain more credible, legitimate and effective information and strategies compared to traditional research and expert work [15, 16]. In particular, the results produced have generally more direct effects on decision-making processes [2].

In the context of cultural and building heritage, the incorporation of public discussion presents a multifaceted landscape of opportunities and challenges, due to the fact that local identity, memory, and power dynamics are profoundly intertwined. Participation was experienced through a variety of methods and approaches. These include citizen participation, co-creative designs, collaborative mechanisms, and community-based initiatives [1]. This cooperation becomes fundamental in the implementation of protection and valorization policies and strategies, where institutions take the final decisions, but where local communities and citizens' associations, as the primary stakeholders of the territory, must actively participate and collaborate. Indeed, the proper use, conservation, and enhancement of this heritage are inextricably linked to popular involvement and participation. It is imperative to encourage users of the territory to reclaim the role played in the formation of a shared, collective identity and as a catalyst for cultural and economic development [17]. In this regard, the involvement of different population categories enables the implementation of strategic actions to be tailored to meet the needs of each group [18].

In light of these considerations, participatory processes are regarded as pragmatic strategies to ensure more effective, sustainable, and meaningful heritage conservation for present and future generations [19]. In this regard, it is imperative to overcome the challenges posed by these processes through an inclusive approach founded on trust, the sharing of expertise and resources, and the acknowledgement of communities' pivotal role in the preservation of their heritage.

Within this framework, the present work adopts a mixed approach [20–22], in order to integrate systematically quantitative and qualitative data in a real-world decision-making process [23, 24]. The decision-making process regards the exploration of alternative scenarios for the reuse of an historical building, called Villa Carpeneto, and its surroundings, located in the municipality of La Loggia, close to the city of Turin (Italy). In particular, the analysis starts with a detailed investigation into the territorial context in which the Villa Carpeneto is located, as well as the historical and planning system of

the building. After the analysis of the state of the art, different community engagement methods are integrated. In particular, a workshop is organized for open discussions and collaborative exchanges among various stakeholders. Then, a structured survey is used to collect empirical data on residents' choices for future uses of the Villa Carpeneto spaces. A working group composed of academic experts was set up to review and discuss the outcomes of the territorial analysis, the workshop, and the structured survey. Rather than applying formal quantitative techniques, the team focused on identifying key needs and opportunities by analyzing the frequency and consistency of responses. This collaborative reflection helped structure potential functions for the villa, ensuring they respond to local priorities and the specific territorial context.

After this introduction, the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the community engagement methods adopted for the participatory process of Villa Carpeneto. Section 3 regards the application of the methodologies previously presented. This section starts with the description of the territorial contexts and characteristics of the building. Then, the paper goes into depth on the description of the deliberative workshops and the survey-based analysis. Section 4 illustrates the results and findings obtained from the participatory engagement process. In Sect. 5, conclusive remarks and future perspectives are highlighted.

2 Community Engagement Methods

Over the last few decades, participatory approaches in conservation research have grown and evolved. They have moved beyond token forms of consultation, and now include a wide range of inclusive, co-designed methods that allow people to contribute meaningfully to decision-making [25, 26].

There are many ways to involve people, depending on the goal and the level of participation required. Structured tools, such as questionnaires and standardized observations, are useful for collecting data from many respondents and identifying common trends [27]. However, they often provide limited opportunities for participants to express their idea [28]. In contrast, more open-ended methods, like focus groups, interviews, or workshops, allow for deeper discussions and shared learning between researchers and communities [29]. Ethnographic tools, such as participant observation, are helpful in building trust and understanding local experiences [30]. In addition, creative techniques like storytelling, photo elicitation, and oral histories make it possible to explore the emotional and symbolic meanings people attach to places [31]. Spatial tools, including participatory GIS and volunteered geographic information (VGI), give communities the ability to map and visualize their values, needs, and future priorities [32].

For the Villa Carpeneto regeneration, we decided to use two complementary methods: a community workshop and a structured questionnaire. This approach allowed us to combine the depth and spontaneity of group discussion with the comparability of collected survey data.

In practice, we started with a workshop that brought together around seventy people from La Loggia and nearby municipalities. The aim was to reflect collectively on broader urban issues, identify shortcomings in infrastructure and cultural facilities, and encourage dialogue across local boundaries. Only after this first step did we focus more

on Villa Carpeneto. A structured questionnaire was used to collect insights on possible future uses of the villa and its surroundings.

This two-phase approach helped us reach different segments of the population. The workshops gave participants the chance to discuss their priorities and co-create ideas in a collaborative setting. Meanwhile, the questionnaire allowed us to involve more people, including those who could not attend the events, including residents of nearby municipalities, and to compare responses systematically. This combination of methods aligns with recognized standards in participatory research and underlines the importance of adapting tools to the specific phase of the process, available resources, and the characteristics of the target population.

3 Application

3.1 Territorial and Urban Context of Villa Carpeneto

La Loggia is a municipality of 8724 inhabitants [33] in the metropolitan city of Turin. It is located about 6 km south of Turin and is part of the so-called second belt, strategically located with respect to some of the main connection arteries of the metropolitan area (Fig. 1). The municipality covers an area of 12.79 km^2 and borders the municipalities of Vinovo, Moncalieri and Carignano. This territory offers cultural services and facilities that are characteristic of the regional historical-artistic heritage, such as the Galli Castle and the della Rovere Castle (in Vinovo). The two municipalities also have libraries, primary schools and two big commercial centers, whose services are not only offered to the citizens of La Loggia but also to the neighboring municipalities. The surrounding area, covering about 14 municipalities in a radius of 10 km from the Villa Carpeneto, is equally composed in terms of services, with a few exceptions within the larger agglomerations. The municipalities in this territory are characterized by diversified population, and the presence of small and medium centres located primarily in plain regions. Moncalieri has the highest with a population of more than 56,000 individuals, followed by Carmagnola and Orbassano with a population of 28,000 and 23,000 respectively. Osasio and Castagnole Piemonte are some of the smaller centres with less than 3000 individuals [33].

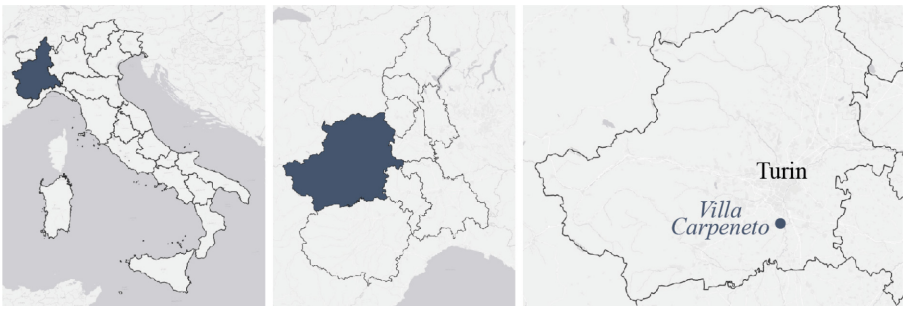


Fig. 1. Geographical location of Villa Carpeneto, La Loggia (TO).

From the hospitality point of view, the accommodation capacity is rather limited in most municipalities, with a clear prevalence of small facilities. Carmagnola and Moncalieri stand out for the largest number of accommodation facilities and beds available. Tourist presences are mainly concentrated in Moncalieri, which records over 110,000 overnight stays, followed by Orbassano and Candiolo [34].

Focusing on the area around La Loggia (Fig. 2), the river Po represents a very important and identifying element. The Parco Naturale del Po Piemontese is a natural area that develops thanks to this important watercourse, extending in a north-south direction. In addition to protecting biodiversity, it also offers the possibility of several cycling and walking routes along the river to the north. Within this area, we also find a Special Protection Zone (SPA) that coincides with a Site of Community Importance (SCI) called Lanca di Santa Marta. These places are fundamental to the local ecological network, contributing to the conservation of biodiversity and offering spaces for sustainable land use.

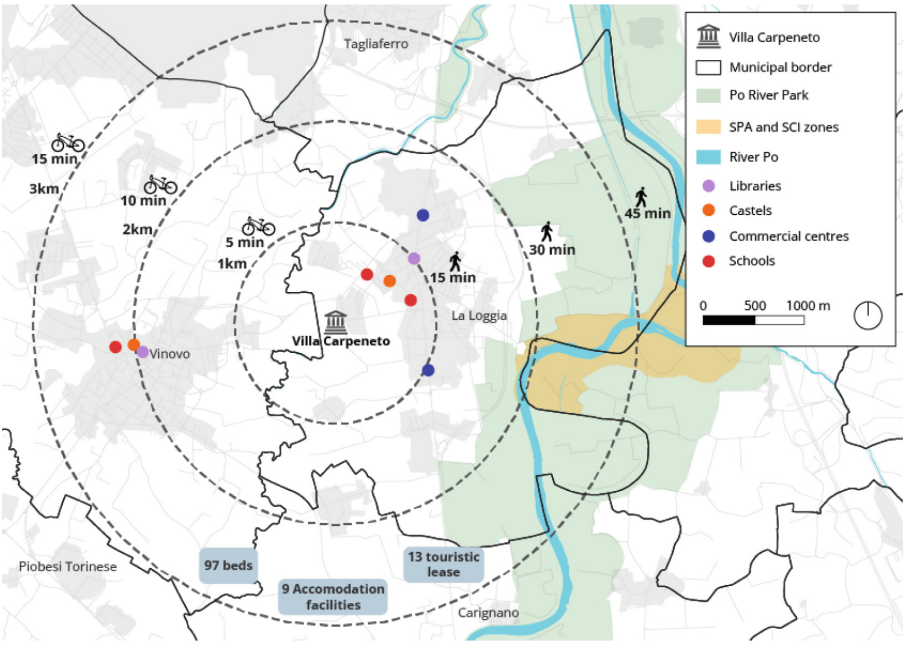


Fig. 2. Local context Villa Carpeneto.

Villa Carpeneto is located west of the town center, right on the municipal boundary of La Loggia. This building is an architectural property of cultural interest, recognized by the Italian Cultural Heritage and Landscape Code (Leg. Decree No. 42/2004). The current city plan places the Villa in the sub-area of the town which includes the rural pertinences of the complex. The regulations of the plan designated this area exclusively for public services and green spaces, while for the historic building, the maximum restoration and conservative renovation is allowed as the maximum intervention.

Vehicular access to the Villa is provided by provincial street no.145, which connects La Loggia with nearby Vinovo. Bicycle and pedestrian access are instead provided by the entrance boulevard, which starts from the center of the village and leads to the Villa's entrance gate. The areas surrounding the Villa Carpeneto complex are mostly natural or agricultural. Near the Villa, there are residential blocks and a large industrial complex.

The villa is surrounded by a modest communication network, mainly vehicular, that efficiently connects it with Turin. Its proximity to two major infrastructures, such as Turin's bypass (*Tangenziale Sud*) and the Turin-Savona highway, allow for a rapid connection not only with southern Piedmont and Liguria Region, but with all the other main highways.

If on a road level the Villa is in a favorable position, this is not the case for connections by local public transport. La Loggia is mainly connected to Turin by suburban buses, which are running at low frequencies. In addition, Moncalieri has a railway station served by four lines of the Metropolitan Railway Service (SFM), but it is not efficiently connected to the municipality of La Loggia.

This difference between public and private transport is very evident from the travelling times from the Villa to the relevant elements of the area. In Figs. 3 and 4, accessibility to the main mobility nodes, historic centers, cultural and environmental assets was studied. In particular, accessibility by private transport shows how most of the identified elements fall within average travel times of one hour. Whereas with public transport, travel times increase due to the lack of interconnection between mobility nodes. In fact, the same destinations that used to be reachable within one hour are reachable in about two hours by public transport.

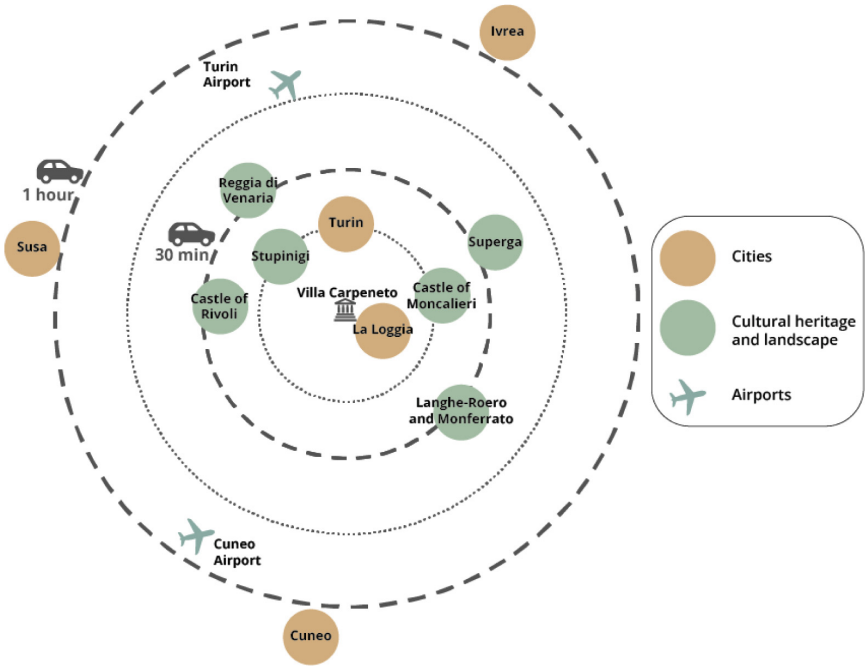


Fig. 3. Travel time from Villa Carpeneto to the main elements in the territory by private vehicle.

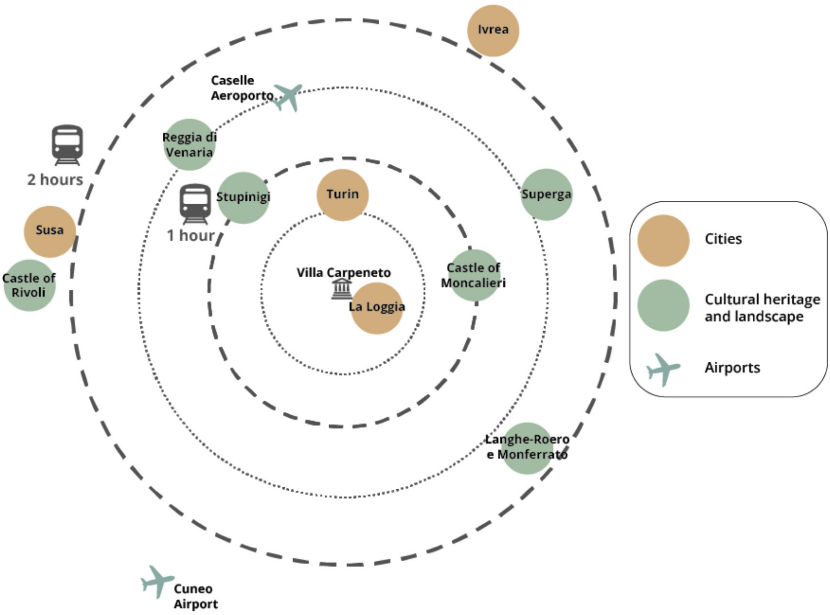


Fig. 4. Travel time from Villa Carpeneto to the main elements in the territory by Local Public Transport.

3.2 Analysis of the Current State and Potential of the Villa

The Villa Carpeneto is a historic building located in the municipality of La Loggia, Turin. The symbolic nature of this building encouraged the municipality to acquire it in 2024. This complex is now in a poor state of conservation due to a long period of total lack of maintenance and vandalism, which has compromised many of the valuable architectural elements present. In addition, the spaces have become overgrown with invasive vegetation. These conditions make some parts of the complex inaccessible and they complicate the assessment of the villa's true condition (Fig. 5).

From the outside, it is possible to get a general idea of the spaces available throughout the complex. The main access to the east is marked by a large gate that shows no visible signs of structural compromise.

Inside the complex is the former caretaker's house with an attached greenhouse (to the south) and, on the opposite side of the courtyard, the farmhouse (to the north). These spaces are currently difficult to access and show extensive damage, including the deterioration of the plaster and the presence of encroaching vegetation.

The aulic block of the villa (located to the west) is the element of greatest architectural value and the one that shows the most evident signs of deterioration. Both externally and internally, there are visible signs of vandalism and looting of architectural elements and furnishings considered to be of value. Externally, the main loggia has lost its balustrade, while the interior has been stripped of its precious majolica and parquet flooring. The stucco decorations, although slightly damaged, have survived and can be seen in many of the rooms. Some valuable elements such as the fireplaces, the woodwork in the library



Fig. 5. Current status of Villa Carpeneto (July 2024).

(although badly damaged) and the banister of the iconic "shell" staircase have been preserved.

Finally, the chapel, located between the Aulic block and the farmhouse, retains its original configuration and wooden pews, although the sacred furnishings are missing.

From a structural point of view, throughout the villa there are critical problems in the wooden horizons of the upper floors and the roof, which have been damaged by vegetation infiltration. Particularly noteworthy is a significant vertical crack in the loggia on the first floor, which could indicate structural failure.

Among the open spaces surrounding the complex, the gardens are now deprived of the original traces of Russell Page's design due to the uncontrolled growth of invasive vegetation. The large avenue leading to the town center is now inaccessible, but the original trees are still there, and it will be possible to restore the cycle-pedestrian path that has been hidden by vegetation over time. On the other hand, the large portal that gives access to the avenue from the urban fabric is badly damaged.

From the perspective of reusing the spaces described above, a number of functions and activities have been identified that are considered compatible and offer great opportunities for recovery. These functions are preliminary ideas that emerged from discussions with the municipality and considerations regarding the functionality of the available spaces, and they will be juxtaposed with the outcomes of the workshop. Among the

options that emerged, recreational and cultural activities such as workshops, a library, a venue for exhibitions and events, and ceremonies are certainly possibilities for the villa's outdoor space; accommodation and restoration activities seem appropriate for spaces such as the farmhouse, while the chapel could be reused for exhibitions, events, and small-scale ceremonies.

On the other hand, activities preferable in the open air are considered excellent for the garden of the villa, such as an open-air cinema or other events that can combine culture and entertainment, as well as sports activities. Finally, some tourist services could be provided in the areas of the former caretaker's house and the greenhouses.

3.3 Community Workshops

The community workshop was a key methodological step to initiate dialogue and gather local knowledge in a structured but informal way. To foster an open and inclusive discussion environment, participants were organized into small heterogeneous groups, each composed of individuals with different roles and interest in the area. In the center of each table, a large paper board served as the main tool for discussion. Participants were asked to write on sticky note their responses to a series of predefined, open-ended questions. The first question, "What is missing in the area?", aimed to identify gaps in infrastructure, public services, and underused spaces in the southern part of the Turin metropolitan area, where La Loggia is located. It served as a starting point for collective analysis. The second question, "What would you like for the future?", invited participants to define their priorities based on the needs previously identified. Finally, "Where should these initiatives be implemented?" encouraged them to translate their ideas into practical proposals by pointing to specific locations in La Loggia and nearby municipalities. Together, these prompts supported a structured reflection on local challenges, desired improvements, and concrete opportunities for development.

Facilitators were present to support the process. Their role was not to guide the discussion, but to ensure that discussions remained accessible and respectful and that all voices were heard. This approach encouraged an interactive dynamic, allowing participants to contribute individually, and to expand the discussion through spontaneous conversation.

3.4 Survey-Based Analysis

After the workshop, a structured survey was launched to collect more systematic information on how the local community in the southern metropolitan area of Turin envisions the future use of Villa Carpeneto. The aim was to better understand preferences among the proposed functions and ensure that any future intervention reflects the everyday needs and expectations of residents.

The questionnaire was designed to be clear and easy to complete. It began with a section on participants' awareness of the villa, asking whether they knew its history, had visited the site, or were familiar with its current condition. The next part asked participants to evaluate different possible functions for the villa, such as cultural, educational, recreational, or social uses, and to indicate which ones they considered most relevant.

A further section collected general demographic information, allowing for comparisons across age groups, education levels, and places of residence.

Finally, an open-ended space was included for comments or suggestions, offering participants the opportunity to share more personal opinions or new ideas not covered in the predefined categories. To reach a wide and diverse audience, the survey was distributed both online and on paper. The digital version was shared through social media and the municipality's mailing lists, while printed copies were made available directly by the local administration.

4 Key Insights from Community Engagement

4.1 Community Workshop Outcomes

In November 2024, a workshop was held in La Loggia to actively involve the local community in rethinking the future of Villa Carpeneto. About seventy people participated, including residents, association representatives, local businesses, and delegates from neighboring municipalities (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Participation meeting of November in La Loggia (TO), Italy.

During the workshop, participants expressed several concerns about the area. One of the most common concerns was the scarcity of public infrastructure and shared community spaces. Participants stressed the absence of accessible areas where families,

young people and residents in general can gather, relax or engage in cultural and recreational activities. There was a strong call for creating a multifunctional place that can host cultural events, educational initiatives and social interactions. Recurring suggestions included the creation of a public library, exhibition spaces and places for local assemblies.

The importance of promoting a stronger local identity also emerged, with several participants calling for stronger links between local schools and Turin-based cultural institutions. Other proposals focused on innovation and inclusion, with ideas such as training hubs for young people, environmental research centers and coworking spaces for local professionals.

Culture and leisure were consistently cited as strategic levers for local development. Inspired by the experiences of neighboring municipalities, residents proposed outdoor cinemas, community festivals, and thematic markets. Sports and wellness activities were also appreciated, not only for their recreational benefits, but also for their potential in improving social cohesion and contributing to the local economy.

Finally, the improvement of public transportation and the development of cycling infrastructure were considered essential to improve daily mobility and promote more sustainable modes of transportation.

Villa Carpeneto was often mentioned as the perfect place to host many of these ideas. It was envisioned as a cultural and social center, with areas for exhibitions, a small municipal theater, and a public library. The surrounding green area was seen as a space for outdoor workshops, performances and family events.

4.2 Survey Findings

The survey was completed by 126 people. Most of them were residents of La Loggia (78 percent), while the rest were from neighboring municipalities in the southern part of the Turin metropolitan area (22 percent). The questionnaire was available both online and in paper format to facilitate everyone's participation. The group of respondents was diverse in terms of age and education, with a majority between the ages of 35 and 54 and a balanced number with a high school diploma or college degree. This suggests an engaged and reflective community interested in local development.

When asked about potential future uses of the villa, respondents expressed strong support for cultural and artistic functions. Proposals included temporary exhibition spaces, collaborations with cultural institutions, and venues for concerts and public events. Educational uses also featured prominently: the villa was envisioned as a place where traditional crafts could intersect with emerging technologies, creating opportunities for intergenerational learning and attracting professionals with specialized skills.

A number of responses emphasized the enhancement of public spaces and community life. Suggestions included the creation of botanical gardens, pedestrian and bicycle paths, outdoor cinemas, and local markets. Special attention was also given to the needs of families and vulnerable groups, with proposals for daycare services, inclusive learning environments and intergenerational centers.

Another important theme was the potential for sustainable economic models. Several interviewees suggested that parts of the villa could be used for private events, such as weddings or conferences, as a means of generating revenue without compromising the

cultural integrity of the site. Others suggested the creation of a café or restaurant with local products as a way to attract visitors and stimulate the local economy.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

This contribution presented a participatory decision framework aiming at supporting the exploration of alternative scenarios of reuse of an historical building. The building called Villa Carpeneto is considered a symbol of the municipality of La Loggia, where it is located. For this reason, the involvement of the citizens and all relevant stakeholders in the decision-making process became fundamental. After the detailed investigation of the Villa Carpeneto, as well as its relationship with the surroundings and the territorial context, a two-step community engagement approach was proposed. Firstly, open discussions and collaborative exchanges among the various stakeholders were exploited in open discussions. Secondly, empirical data on residents' opinions and preferences on the future of the Villa Carpeneto were collected through a structured survey.

The entire process increased the sense of shared ownership and involvement, ensuring that the people who are going to benefit the most from the restoration of the villa have a say in it. Additionally, the process followed highlighted how the evolution of the territory and its actualization should aim at ambitious goals based on a participatory approach, that considers the cultural, socio-economic and environmental heritage that will be left to future generations. In this regard, the most effective way to intervention is through an integrated approach, that makes use of a collaborative effort between different entities with the aim of achieving a shared goal. In this way, the local development can achieve multiple benefits, spanning the enrichment of individual lives and their well-being, the strengthening of the community social capital and economic growth, the revitalization of urban and rural areas, the promotion of sustainable tourism, and the attractiveness of the territory.

Future perspectives of the research will regard the elaboration of the data of the survey according to the Best-Worst Scaling (BWS) approach [35]. The community's preferences regarding the future development of Villa Carpeneto were asked specifically according to the logic of BWS. In BWS, people rate a set of three or more elements on a subjective scale, selecting the best and the worst ones. The identification of the most and least preferred should be more reliable than ranking all the elements, as required, for example, by the ranking method of conjoint analysis [36]. Using BWS, it will be possible to obtain more precise and quantitative results on the future uses of the Villa Carpeneto, according to the preferences expressed by the citizens. Moreover, the results will be used to propose real project proposals for the redevelopment of the building, that takes into account the social, economic and environmental aspects in play. An implementation plan for the interventions will be defined through a detailed timetable of the activity. This will consider the costs and sources of funding, as well as the involvement of the various stakeholders and the procedures for implementation.

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