Regeneration and Reuse of Heritage in Basso Sangro Trigno: An Opportunity for the Sustainable Development of Inner Areas

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Abstract. The Basso Sangro Trigno area in Abruzzo is one of the 72 pilot areas identified by the National Strategy for Inner Areas, a national policy introduced in 2014 aimed at reducing social, economic, and demographic disparities between urban centers and the more marginal regions of the country.

The out-migration towards urban centers and the aging population have had significant repercussions on both the quality and availability of services, leading to increased management costs, particularly in key sectors such as education, healthcare, and mobility. However, the progressive depopulation of these areas has also deeply impacted the surrounding landscapes - both natural and built. Nevertheless, the regeneration of these territories through the reuse of existing heritage can represent a vital opportunity for their revitalization.

Although often underestimated, neglected, or abandoned, heritage remains a fundamental resource for the sustainable development of these territories. The concept of reuse emerges as an approach that preserves the identity and uniqueness of places while counteracting urban sprawl and fostering local community involvement in heritage management practices. This aligns with the principles outlined in the United Nations' Global Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This paper analyzes territorial regeneration models applicable to inner areas, with a focus on the case study of Basso Sangro Trigno. In this context, strategies are proposed based on the reuse of abandoned assets and the strengthening of community networks, seen as key actors in the shared management of recovered resources, with the aim of returning them to the public good.

Keywords: Inner areas · Reuse · Regeneration · Community

1 Introduction

Inner areas are often characterized by demographic, economic, and social fragility. However, they also hold a vast and diverse environmental, historical, and cultural heritage. With the introduction of the National Strategy for Inner Areas, Basso Sangro Trigno has gained particular significance as one of the 72 pilot areas targeted for initiatives aimed at curbing depopulation, improving access to essential services, and bridging the socio-economic gap with more urbanized centers.

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In this context, regeneration and the reuse of existing heritage represent crucial opportunities to trigger sustainable development processes. Inner areas are undergoing profound transformations, suspended in a phase of "no longer and not yet" (Salvatore, Chiodo, 2017). Once seen as symbols of decline and abandonment, these territories are now beginning to emerge as places of potential.

2 Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach aimed at exploring and understanding the social, cultural, and spatial dynamics related to regeneration processes in inner areas, with a particular focus on the Basso Sangro Trigno area. The methodology employed is based on the integrated use of various research tools: document analysis, case studies from the Italian context, direct field observation, and exploratory interviews conducted with local administrators and community representatives.

The document analysis phase focused on an in-depth examination of the main national and regional strategic planning tools (National Strategy for Inner Areas, Regional Laws, Local Development Plans, Framework Program Agreements), as well as academic literature, press articles, and documents produced by local actors and institutions.

This phase made it possible to reconstruct the regulatory and strategic framework for inner areas, to understand how policies are received and implemented in the territories, and to identify guiding concepts useful for the analysis of case studies, thereby informing the subsequent phases of the research.

Some case studies were selected based on characteristics comparable to the Basso Sangro Trigno context: small population size, presence of underused or abandoned building stock, and experimentation with reuse models based on participatory approaches. The selection of case studies was determined both by the availability and accessibility of data and information, and by direct field observations, including site visits and conversations with local actors and residents, which enriched the understanding of the analyzed contexts.

Direct field observation was carried out through site inspections, participation in public events and workshops, exploration of places, photographic surveys, and conversations with local actors and residents. This enriched the overall understanding, allowing for the identification of aspects often not detectable otherwise, and highlighting hidden challenges and potentialities within the analyzed contexts.

Interviews were conducted with local administrators, third sector representatives, and residents. The interviews with local administrators explored policy-related aspects, with the aim of investigating the effects and impacts generated in the territories.

The interviews with third sector representatives (associations, community cooperatives) examined the role of ongoing or completed initiatives in processes of territorial regeneration and/or socially driven reactivation, with particular attention to shared management practices and the main operational challenges encountered.

Cartographic representations were created using official institutional, regulatory, and ministerial sources, selected based on criteria of reliability, relevance, and consistency with the objectives of the analysis.

In addition, statistical data and materials from previous research carried out at the Master's Lab of Professor Massimo Angrilli, Department of Architecture in Pescara, were also consulted.

3 From Urban Areas to Inner Areas

Non-urban areas - those we often simplistically refer to as rural or natural - make up 98% of the Earth's surface. These territories, particularly what we call the countryside, are undergoing profound transformations and are increasingly being viewed as places of possibility and experimentation. In his work Countryside. A Report (2020), architect Rem Koolhaas, presents the result of a wide-ranging investigation that culminated in the exhibition of the same name at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, offers a critical reflection on the evolving role of the countryside. The work explores development dynamics affecting extra-urban areas, highlighting the often-invisible, profound changes occurring within them, and proposing these territories as strategic spaces for experimentation and innovation. Our culture is deeply rooted in the city/countryside, urban/rural dichotomy, but we must move beyond the idea of rurality as the opposite of the city. It would be more fruitful, in fact, to think of space as a site where relationships occur—as the product of practices, trajectories, and social and relational interactions (Massey, 2005). Within the dense and diverse mosaic of territories and landscapes that make up the European Union, a predominant portion consists of non-urban areas. Rural zones are a fundamental part of the EU, recognized and valued for their food production and resource management, as well as for the breadth and variety of natural and cultural landscapes (European Commission, 2021). However, it cannot be denied that these uneven and vulnerable areas—shaken by deep social and economic changes, including globalization and urbanization—have seen their roles called into question in recent decades and face significant challenges related to access to and the provision of services. The issue of service accessibility has become increasingly central in the European regional political agenda, resulting in a shift of focus toward those inner areas that face the greatest challenges in terms of well-being and social inclusion, bringing to light concerns related to equity and social justice, especially in terms of access to basic services. In Italy, the debate on so-called "inner areas"—understood as territories significantly distant from centers providing essential public services (healthcare, education, mobility) and rich in environmental and cultural resources (DPS, 2014)—has reemerged strongly in the last decade, reviving a line of thought that, albeit intermittently, has influenced political, public, and academic discourse for at least a century. Since the second decade of the 2000s, conditions have become favorable in Italy and across Europe for the development and testing - perhaps for the first time - of territorial (place-based) policies aimed at addressing "the persistent underuse of resources" and "reducing persistent social exclusion in specific places" (Barca, 2009).

In March 2010, the European Council in Brussels approved the Territorial Agenda 2020, which set out the important goal of bringing territorial cohesion policies back to the heart of European decisions. It emphasized the need to ensure all citizens have access to adequate services, promoting a program focused on knowledge and innovation that is both sustainable and inclusive. With the aim of promoting harmonious development

and enhancing economic, social, and territorial growth within the European Union - and in accordance with Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which calls for "special attention to be paid to rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions with severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps, such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross-border, and mountain regions" - Italy, like other member states, introduced specific policies aimed at increasing livability and social cohesion in these territories, with a focus on citizenship rights.

Today, policies targeting inner areas are implemented through the National Strategy for Inner Areas (DPS, 2014). Introduced in 2014 by the then Minister for the South and Territorial Cohesion, Fabrizio Barca, the strategy aims to counter depopulation and improve quality of life in terms of social inclusion, employment, and reducing the long-term costs of territorial abandonment. This is a public policy for development and territorial cohesion based on a place-based approach. It aims to revitalize development in areas characterized by socioeconomic marginalization by enhancing their opportunities and addressing the main obstacles - particularly access to public services (healthcare, education, mobility): the longer the travel time to service-providing municipalities, the greater the gap affecting those communities. From a methodological standpoint, the territorial classification of inner areas begins by identifying "hub" or "inter-municipal hub" municipalities, i.e., those that serve as centers for public service provision. The remaining municipalities are categorized into four groups - belt, intermediate, peripheral, and ultra-peripheral - based on the travel time required to reach a hub. Starting in 2015, within the national context, a transparent and rigorous territorial planning process was launched to select the areas in which to concentrate interventions (Mantino, Locatelli, 2016). The 55 areas initially selected in July 2015 increased to 68 in December 2016 and were formalized as 72 in 2017, as reported in the Annual Report on the National Strategy for Inner Areas (December 2018). These areas encompass a total of 51,366 km^2, comprising 1,077 municipalities spread across the country, with a total population of 2,072,718 (as of 2016). Of the 1,077 municipalities, 57.7% are classified as peripheral or ultra-peripheral. The selection of project areas resulted from a public investigation process, facilitated by cooperation among the Inner Areas Technical Committee (CTAI), the State, Regions, local governments, inter-municipal unions, and local associations. Among the project areas proposed by each Region, one is designated as the prototype area, which begins the process of implementing the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) ahead of the others. The prototype area - and subsequently the others - develops its own area strategy, which sets out the principles for action to counter the negative trends affecting each specific territory.

4 The Inner Areas of Abruzzo and the Basso Sangro Trigno Area

In the Abruzzo region, within the framework of the National Strategy for Inner Areas, four project areas were identified starting in 2015[1]: Val Fino–Vestina, Valle Subequana–Gran Sasso, Valle Giovenco–Roveto, and Basso Sangro–Trigno. These were joined in

[1] As established by Regional Council Resolution No. 290 of 14/04/2015.

2016[2] by the Alto Aterno–Gran Sasso Laga area and, later, in 2022[3], by the inner areas of Piana del Cavaliere Alto Liri and Valle del Sagittario e dell'Alto Sangro.

Out of a total of 305 municipalities, as many as 230 are classified as inner areas, of which 115 fall into the categories of peripheral and ultra-peripheral areas. These municipalities are mainly concentrated in the mountainous zones along the Apennine ridge (Department for Cohesion Policies and the South – Presidency of the Council of Ministers). Moreover, in 253 of these municipalities, the resident population is fewer than 5,000 inhabitants (ISTAT, Permanent Population Census – Abruzzo, May 2024) (Fig. 1).

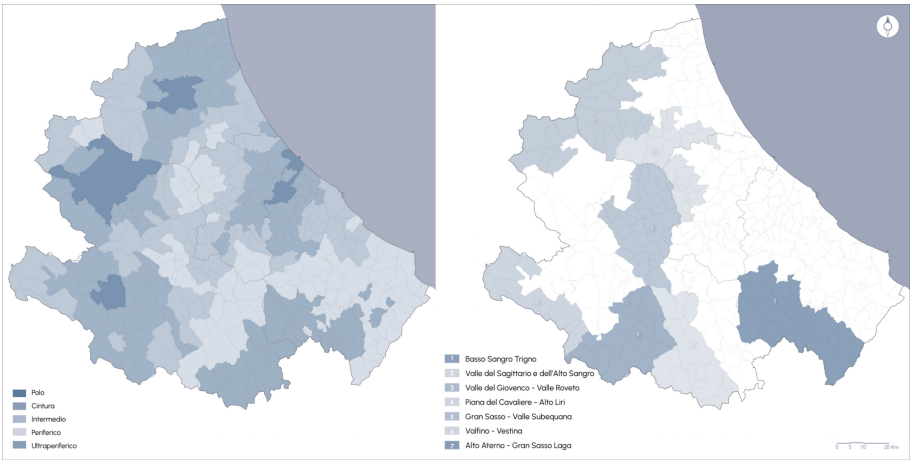

Fig. 1. SNAI classification of inner areas in Abruzzo (left), SNAI project areas (right). Source: Author's elaboration based on data from the Department for Development and Economic Cohesion - Ministry of Economic Development and the Abruzzo Region.

In total, the seven inner areas of Abruzzo (2021–2027 programming cycle) are home to a resident population of 464,843 inhabitants, representing 37% of the region's total population. Within this framework lies the Basso Sangro Trigno Area.

This area includes 37 municipalities[4] in the province of Chieti, located between the eastern Maiella and the border with Molise, and is home to 21,778 inhabitants (ISTAT 2024), accounting for 5.7% of the population of the province of Chieti and 1.7% of the regional population (Fig. 2).

[2] Regional Council Resolution No. 613 of 26/09/2016.

[3] Regional Council Resolution No. 857 of 27/12/2022.

[4] Borrello, Carunchio, Castelguidone, Castiglione Messer Marino, Celenza sul Trigno, Civitaluparella, Civitella Messer Raimondo, Colledimacine, Colledimezzo, Fallo, Fara San Martino, Fraine, Gamberale, Gessopalena, Lama dei Peligni, Lettopalena, Montazzoli, Montebello sul Sangro, Monteferrante, Montelapiano, Montenerodomo, Palena, Palombaro, Pennadomo, Pietraferrazzana, Pizzoferrato, Quadri, Roccascalegna, Roccaspinalveti, Roio del Sangro, Rosello, San Giovanni Lipioni, Schiavi di Abruzzo, Taranta Peligna, Torrebruna, Torricella Peligna e Villa Santa Maria.

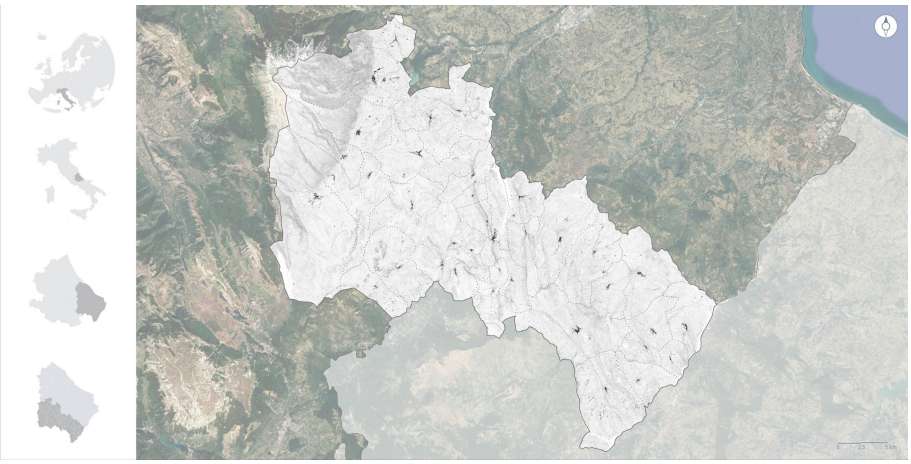

Fig. 2. Overview of the Basso Sangro-Trigno Area. Source: Author's elaboration based on GIS data.

In the Basso Sangro Trigno area, a steady demographic decline has been observed for some time, largely attributable to depopulation dynamics linked to the migration of residents toward valley-floor urban centers and coastal areas. This phenomenon is primarily driven by a lack of essential services and employment opportunities, as well as the selective outmigration of young people. Once they leave for educational purposes, they tend not to return after completing their studies, thus contributing to the erosion of local human capital. This process leads, among other effects, to a significant aging of the resident population, with elderly people making up 32% of the total—substantially higher than both the regional average (23.4%) and the national average for inner areas (21.2%). This demographic imbalance exacerbates the area's social and economic vulnerability, further diminishing the capacity for community stewardship and regeneration. Moreover, the outflow of residents and the associated aging process have a notable impact on the quality and quantity of public services, leading to a significant increase in their management costs. Outward migration flows are particularly intense in inner areas, primarily directed toward major urban centers and foreign countries, while inward migration trends are weak and insufficient to offset the negative population balance. This imbalance accelerates demographic thinning and further weakens territorial resilience.

As a result, on the one hand, urban and metropolitan areas are experiencing growing congestion, becoming increasingly exclusive and, in many cases, unaffordable for residents due to rising rental costs. On the other hand, entire inner territories are becoming depopulated, leaving behind numerous vacant and unused buildings.

One of the key challenges we face, therefore, concerns the reuse and sustainable management of this vast abandoned building stock, which should be addressed in conjunction with the enhancement of rural and forested open spaces.

5 Regeneration Through the Reuse of Built Heritage

The regeneration of inner areas through the reuse of the built heritage represents a crucial strategy for sustainable and inclusive development, in line with the goals of the 2030 Agenda, specifically the aim to make cities and communities sustainable (Goal 11) and to achieve land degradation neutrality (Goal 15).

In many territories - particularly in mountainous and rural areas - there exists a vast building stock made up of structures, small constructions, and workshops that are largely abandoned or unused due to the depopulation affecting these regions.

However, the recovery of abandoned or underused assets in fragile areas offers a tangible opportunity for revitalization, both socioeconomically and environmentally. It helps reduce land consumption and environmental impact, improves planning and management (SDG 11.3.1), and restores degraded environments while preserving ecological balance (SDG 15.3.1). Moreover, as Angrilli and Morrica (2016) highlight, *"approaches based on recycling and reinterpretation of buildings and territories are particularly relevant - if not the only viable option - in contexts where traditional top-down interventions are not feasible"*. Such an approach promotes local resources and stimulates a regeneration process that is genuinely sustainable and participatory. In this context, innovative tools such as collaboration pacts between citizens and institutions, co-design workshops, and community cooperatives enable residents to actively participate in regeneration efforts. These tools support the creation of services and foster the management of shared spaces that truly respond to the needs of the local territory. In rural settings in particular, Community Cooperatives play a crucial role. These are social enterprises aimed at producing goods and services that have a stable and lasting impact on the social and economic well-being of the community.

The International Cooperative Alliance already emphasized their mission in 1995: "Cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members". Thus, the concept of community care becomes a fundamental task of cooperative action, taking shape through shared and participatory management. Community cooperatives are increasingly emerging as key actors in the management and redevelopment of properties, offering alternative models based on active participation and inclusiveness - "taking architecture away from the architects and returning it to the people who use it" (De Carlo, 1972, p. 60) - highlighting that it is the communities themselves who create architecture.

In small Italian towns, successful experiments have been carried out using participatory management models for local heritage, transforming disused buildings into multifunctional spaces, artist residencies, cultural centers, artisan workshops, or facilities for experiential and sustainable tourism. A well-known example is Ostana, a small mountain municipality located in the Western Alps, in the province of Cuneo, about 1300 m above sea level, dominated by the spectacular Monviso mountain group, in the Piedmont region. One of the pillars of Ostana's revival was the restoration of its existing building stock. In the 1980s, Ostana had been reduced to just a handful of residents (five permanent inhabitants) and seemed destined for abandonment and obscurity. However, thanks to a visionary mayor, that outcome was avoided. Starting in the mid-1980s - during a time marked by reckless construction - Mayor Lombardo chose to prohibit the construction of new buildings and to promote the restoration of existing ones in line with

the local architectural style and the unique characteristics of the place, believing that beauty would generate more beauty. This process was enriched through collaborations with research centers and universities, such as that with Professor Antonio De Rossi and the Polytechnic University of Turin, who since 2008 have worked to support the architectural recovery of Ostana's built environment. Demographic decline was effectively reversed by enhancing the architectural and landscape heritage: cultural spaces were created, including a center for the Occitan language and facilities for sustainable tourism. These spaces, developed based on the community's needs through a participatory design process, are now managed by the local community cooperative. Indeed, in Ostana, the birth of the community cooperative *Viso a Viso* in the spring of 2020—during the height of the pandemic—was crucial in preventing the final abandonment of the village and enabling the management of the regenerated structures. Today, Ostana stands as a model for alpine regeneration.

Another example is Grottole, in the Basilicata region, where since 2018 the *Wonder Grottole* project has initiated the mapping and regeneration of abandoned buildings through a proactive collaboration between the local community and external stakeholders. This regeneration effort, which includes artist residencies, the renovation of abandoned homes, and experiential tourism activities linked to local traditions, has triggered a virtuous cycle of economic and territorial revitalization. Other successful cases are scattered throughout Italy, where local communities - supported by public and private stakeholders - have initiated virtuous actions that actively contribute to the revitalization of local economies (notable examples include the community cooperatives of Castel del Giudice in Molise, and those of San Leo and Succiso in Emilia-Romagna).

Although these cases show encouraging results, *"for the participatory approach to work, certain contextual conditions must exist, which are not always present and not always replicable"* (Giusti, 2001). Challenges often involve the lack of competent leadership in managing such processes, the scarcity of consistent long-term financial resources, the difficulty in directly engaging stakeholders, and a potential disengagement of the local community (Maino, Cau, 2023). It is therefore essential to understand whether the contextual conditions in each setting are genuinely adequate and whether they represent the most appropriate choice for applying participatory models.

6 Abandonment and the Applicability of Heritage Recovery in the Basso Sangro Trigno Area

The history of Abruzzo is inextricably intertwined with the theme of the abandonment - partial or total - of historic centers, often due to the consequences of the Second World War and the succession of natural disasters such as earthquakes and landslides, which over time have drastically affected the livability of many towns.

Whether it concerns the abandonment of large or small buildings, agricultural areas, pastures, or agrarian landscapes, or even the complete or partial desertion of ancient villages and their relocation[5] just a few kilometers away, the Basso Sangro Trigno area

[5] Law No. 445 of July 9, 1908, established for the first time the relocation of settlements due to hydrogeological or seismic instability.

is no exception. One such example is the village of Buonanotte, which in the mid - 1950s was relocated due to a landslide that threatened the settlement and is now completely abandoned. Montebello sul Sangro, the new town founded further downstream in a flatter, more accessible area, is one of the many examples of relocation seen across Abruzzocases in which, as elsewhere, the new housing settlements failed to retain the population (Varagnoli, Serafini, Verazzo 2020).

Similarly, the ancient settlement of Gessopalena, carved into and shaped by gypsum, was abandoned and relocated due to a series of catastrophic events: in 1850, a landslide caused the collapse of the old town and split the village in two; the 1933 Majella earthquake caused extensive damage, prompting residents to move to a safer location; and the destruction from World War II marked its definitive decline. The geological fragility of the Abruzzo region has been a key factor in the abandonment of these ancient settlements in favor of more accessible and safer areas, often immediately adjacent to the critical zones. As a result, we see that the inland areas of Abruzzo are composed of a series of new settlements that stand alongside ruins. Abandonment particularly affects small rural villages and hamlets, where it may involve clusters of contiguous buildings (known as "pocket abandonment") - as is the case in Fallo, Rosello, Pietraferrazzana, and Monteferrante - or total abandonment of the built fabric, affecting all other settlements where at least one in three houses is unoccupied. In Colledimacine, out of a total of 443 residential buildings, 106 are in a state of ruin. Of the remaining buildings, only 150 are permanently inhabited, while 24 are used only sporadically (Serafini 2016). A similar situation can be found in Lettopalena, Palena, San Giovanni Lipioni, and other towns throughout the area. Beginning in 2020, the small village of San Giovanni Lipioni saw the launch of urban regeneration initiatives thanks to the commitment of the social promotion association Riabitare San Giovanni, as part of a project supported by GAL Maiella Verde. The initiative aimed to counteract the ongoing depopulation of the village through the functional and architectural rehabilitation of disused buildings and the promotion of new forms of living, actively involving both the resident community and external actors. One of the key elements of the intervention was the survey of abandoned properties, conducted by the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Bologna.

Fifteen vacant building clusters within the town center were identified. However, only one of these clusters - composed of nine housing units - met the necessary conditions to initiate the project: the traceability of the owners and their willingness to participate. In this block, a full restoration of the housing units was carried out, creating favorable conditions for stable residency and the settlement of new, either temporary or permanent, inhabitants. The adopted strategy focused on enhancing both explicit and latent territorial assets, promoting their reinterpretation and transformation into visible, accessible, and activatable resources. The Riabitare San Giovanni project community operates with a systemic vision of territorial regeneration, using an integrated approach that combines the recovery of abandoned buildings with the socioeconomic reactivation and cultural promotion of the area, all in line with the principles of sustainable development and environmental compatibility. The results already observed - though still in the early stages - are significant relative to the village's demographic size (approximately 137 inhabitants): six individuals have chosen to relocate to the village because of the interventions, including four foreigners (a British couple and an American couple) and

two locals returning from the province of Parma. This initial signal of demographic reversal highlights the potential of regeneration models based on conscious reuse practices and community participation. The initiative has also received international attention, as evidenced by a New York Times article published on January 22, 2024: *"An Italian Town Full of the Elderly Wants to Feel Young Again"*, emphasizing the symbolic and replicable value of this experience in Italy's inland areas.

With these foundations, there are real opportunities for applying the process of recovery and reuse of abandoned buildings across the Basso Sangro Trigno area, supporting the revitalization of the local economy and ensuring the habitability of the region. It is important to emphasize that the recovery process should focus on buildings located in the so-called "new settlements", which already offer the structural safety and habitability required. Meanwhile, a separate and more complex discussion is needed to address the future of the ruins.

7 Conclusions

The regeneration and reuse of built heritage represent a strategic tool to counter depopulation and promote sustainable development in Italy's inner areas.

The case of Basso Sangro Trigno, which is part of the National Strategy for Inner Areas, demonstrates how restoring abandoned buildings - combined with active community involvement - can revitalize territories, improve quality of life, and strengthen local identity. Successful experiences in towns like Ostana (Piemonte), Grottole (Basilicata), Castel del Giudice (Molise), Succiso (Emilia-Romagna), confirm the effectiveness of participatory management models in these contexts. In an area as fragmented and fragile as Italy's inner regions, unused heritage can become a valuable resource—one that should be responsibly invested in, in line with the goals of Agenda 2030. By recovering abandoned buildings and avoiding land consumption, these territories can shift from being marginal to becoming engines of economic and social development. Additionally, Italy's inner areas - rich in potential and adaptable to change - can serve as an inspiration for urban centers, where the right to housing is increasingly under threat due to rising rents and housing shortages. Participatory management models thus emerge as a crucial path for the social and economic revitalization of these regions, ensuring that the universal right to housing is preserved a right that, in urban areas, is increasingly becoming a privilege. The cooperative management of restored buildings can serve as a structural, economic, and social regeneration tool, reinforcing territorial identity and fostering community cohesion.

In conclusion, heritage valorization in inner areas is not merely a preservation measure—it is a concrete strategy to combat depopulation, generate new local economies, and rebuild a sense of community. To ensure the success of these processes, an integrated approach is needed—one that combines environmental sustainability, social innovation, and active participation.

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