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Minor historic centres, the many ways of promotion and improvement

Manuela Ricci

As much as 91.8% of Italian municipalities have not more than 15,000 inhabitants, their total area accounting for 70.4% of the whole within their territories, which contain 42.18% of the country's population, one or more historic settlements are almost always located. Many of these have been abandoned, especially by the young, seeking a job or better housing. Their progressive degradation would mean the loss of centres that are vital from the standpoint of maintaining the landscape, the environment and the geomorphology. For this it is important for physical renewal, restoration of monuments and maintenance to be combined with intangible actions in the form of integrated measures able to improve the territory. Thus, just as it does not seem sufficient to concentrate on mere physical renewal, likewise it does not seem sufficient to concentrate only on the scale of the municipality or even that of the small town ('borgo'): the inter-municipal dimension, of vast scale, takes on considerable importance in the improvement processes, for two reasons in particular. The first one regards the possibility of cooperation among various administrations and various subjects carrying on their activity in the territory and sharing human resources and cultural assets; reasoning in terms of systems rather than of points could be the keystone; this is demonstrated by the French case in which inter-municipalities are perhaps the most important manner of territorial governance. The second one is in relation to the need to

create environmental and landscape integration, to avoid harming the potentials of liveability and of usability of the historic centre, also in the light of the 'history of the territory'. Renewal of building assets, attention to the environment and to the new forms of agricultural promotion; actions aimed at creating employment, and at promoting training and service activities, with the specific objectives of keeping the inhabitants in the territory, or of bringing them back there, and of developing forms of sustainable tourism: in this we see condensed the strong nucleus of a road to improvement. The matter of minor historic centres is very subdivided: in substance it depends on the point of view from which one looks: building, local development, demography, environment, commerce and so forth. Each one of these aspects is, often, regulated by sectoral laws (above all at regional level) which, in some instances, succeed in putting together a number of aspects and integrating them with each other. Over and above the practices that derive from regional legislation, all those developed on the basis of European Union funding and programmes should be observed: from Urban (in which there were also measures on the minor historic centres), to programmes more linked to the development of rural areas (Life, etc.), and to programmes such as Interreg, which aim at knowing, and at sharing among the countries of Europe, good practices for devising and planning the development of the territories. In this framework, the roads taken to improvement are numerous. It is possible to mention certain recurrences, certain main solutions, certain actions that have chalked up

particular successes, and even failures. A crucial point emerges: the possible 'cohabitation' or 'integration' between the town planning regulations of the master plan and the improvement action that concerns activities, functions and the territory at a larger scale. From the experiences analyzed it is clear that reasoning according to watertight compartments is not particularly productive; this would give rise to the failure to achieve the added value that only integration at sectoral and territorial level can create. Reading the files shows that integration is by now the road that many administrations are pursuing, even alongside more 'traditional', consolidated, less innovative initiatives. Basing the project on the territory appears the main deterrent. Glancing through the various experiences one cannot help evidencing the recurrence, at times almost banal, of the measures: the network of paths; the wine and gastronomic routes; the 'borgo'-museum; the hosting 'borgo'; the natural commercial centre, etc. How to assess them? What are the elements that distinguish a good practice within the context of so many such actions? The interpretation of the places and the connections offers the possibility of carrying out shared policies that merge with history.

Depopulation, reuse, accessibility

A basic condition for the renewal and improvement of the minor centres is a reversal of trend with respect to depopulation processes. For this to take place it is necessary to provide these centres with the necessary services. While on the one hand it might seem relatively simple to combine small centres and urban quality, on the other hand a rather rigid

and calibrated structure of the settlements on very different requisites than those of life today, creates no few problems of readjustment concerning for example housing standards and accessibility.

Conserving the identity of the populations and places

The key concept of improvement processes is identity. A large city or a small town is made up of physical objects that have their own history linked to the evolution of the relations between town and territory and to its economic and social transformations. But a centre does not consist solely of physical objects, it consists also of its inhabitants, of their way of interacting with the places, of perceiving them and identifying with them: it is necessary to be aware that any physical transformation whatsoever leads to a reformulation of the mental maps of the inhabitants, each project has to ensure that this reformulation is not laborious and does not create imbalances. But the urban identity of a territorial system is in constant evolution, it is not an ensemble of unchangeable characters, but a rational structure that evolves in the course of time. Thus the question becomes bigger, coming up against the identities of which the new inhabitants who often arrive in these centres (not infrequently from outside of the Community) are the bearers, bringing with them different traditions, new ways of living the urban and domestic space.

Not just commerce and tourism

Promoting commerce and tourism are formulae very often banked on for the promotion and improvement of the (minor) historic centres. The risks of such policies, above all when understood in a sectoral sense, are evident: cases of

lost identity, of the upsetting of activities, in which the local community is relegated to marginal positions, are not infrequent. But does a possibility exist of proposing new models of development based on local resources? And what opportunities are there?

Certainly new technologies, biological products, cultural tourism and what is termed knowledge economics can act as a driving force for the development for these centres: repopulation, new activities for residents, old and new, and the promotion of quality tourism that gives heed to the places and to the needs of the users.