

THE GOVERNANCE OF RURAL IDENTITY IN URBAN AREAS

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ABSTRACT:

This paper describes the use of a prototype application to read the value of rural heritage inserted in urban sprawl. Until last decades, rural settlements, as a place of perpetual work-shop rooted to their earth, formed a continuum with their surroundings. Today, under the running changes of globalisation, their components often represent a important heritage of vernacular architecture, marked by man's way of living in time and place. Ever since the Venice Charter this heritage has been the object of self-conscious consideration and the development of decision-making processes, with the task of promoting and conserving cultural diversity and quality of life. These processes needs to allocate a reference meaning for the evidence of the still existing heritage, or of a meaningful development, and ask us to devise sustainable ways to safeguard this significance in areas of highly dynamical transformation.

The research highlights a recording method in order to define which rural settlement can still be considered a heritage for communities and land. To understand if and when this local cultural heritage is able to contribute to the development of the sense of place of its context, taking account also of its intangible aspects. The paper describes the use of a prototype application that can provide local communities with a method of reading the still living rural heritage. Focusing on the city of Milan, in Northern Italy, it defined which settlements generated by farming are still significant for the development of urban identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Context

Historic farmsteads and their buildings make a major contribution to the richly varied character of countryside an land, and illustrate the long history of farming and settlement in their own landscape. Today, wherever in the world, the relation between urban and rural becomes extremely complex, especially in highly dynamical landscapes, such as metropolitan areas. In Europe, where rural areas make up 90% of territory, these areas are feeling the effects of abandonment, dwindling populations and economic stagnation. The transformation of rural heritage and the quick evolution of agricultural techniques in the world are a real challenge to the world and to Europe. Abandoning and decaying historic farm buildings and creating new buildings following industrial shapes and models, without any relationship with the sense of place, remove the links between local conditions and farm buildings, signs of cultural landscape in the world.

Looking at these growing risks, in last decades Icomos and CIAV increased demand for safeguarding vernacular heritage. ICOMOS' Mexico Charter, in addition to the Venice Charter, affirmed that vernacular architecture is "a fundamental expression of a community's culture and relationship with its territory, as well as an embodiment of the world's cultural diversity" (ICOMOS, 2000). Within the vernacular heritage is important distinguishing that coming from agriculture, strictly connected with culture and nature and in continual change in order to follow the development of agriculture. Looking at it, its value is not just in the architectural interest or quality of construction, but rather that their lines and aesthetic connotations epitomising the character of a particular locality. An English farmhouse will never be the same as an Italian or Dutch or Romanian one. The attributes of each have evolved over centuries of agricultural practice and been moulded by

varying modes of social development and different cultural, physical and economic constraints.

Because of their recurring architectonic features, their homogeneity linked to their environment and their place in shaping the landscape, vernacular rural settlements are signifiers of local distinctiveness. Until their farm buildings are still vernacular, linked to their environment and their place in shaping landscape, they can be considered an heritage of "outstanding universal value", as part of both the cultural and the natural heritage of which speak the Paris Convention (UNESCO, 1972).

1.2. Chances and risks

Changing socio-economic conditions in the agricultural sector made this heritage at risk. It is a general problem, inside and outside Europe. Everywhere accession countries and world markets in the area of agriculture and food products, risks to make a globalisation on identity of people, erasing the cultural heritage and the identity of each country and people.

Research is needed to identify the rural vernacular heritage to safeguard, for the definition of the links between site and production in order to reinforce the identity of rural areas, as well as for the development and promotion of new farm able to respect the identity of agrarian landscapes in the world. At a time is equally important to ensure that vernacular patrimony survives in its context, meeting modern legislation relating to needs of farmers involved and of development trends of the land. On these premises, in 2003 Forum UNESCO University and Heritage gave special emphasis on the conservation of rural and vernacular architecture, evocating it as the basis to understand a lifestyle, its adaptation to the land and traditional technologies (FUUH,2003).

For the importance that this heritage plays in protecting the identity of communities further research, inventory and assessment were recommended. UNESCO highlighted that rural

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vernacular heritage should be included in the World Heritage List. On this theme the project introduced by the present paper was launched. Taking into account that:

- farm buildings are a productive structure;
- their conservation needs cannot block the evolution of farming processes;
- historic farm buildings represent an important patrimony for the identity of each country, as testimonial of material culture and farming evolution;
- their conservation has to be linked with the safeguard of their own context and landscape;

the study was finalised on devising a shared method to read the rural vernacularity of settlements born by agricultural production, in order to understand how to manage the integrity of the heritage in context under pressures of transformation.

The research method was defined looking at the complex situation of the city of Milan, as sample of a growing urban area which continue to absorb rural settlements, erasing identity day by day.

2. RECOGNISING LOCAL HERITAGE

2.1. Agriculture and cultural value into urban sprawl

The city of Milan is located between the high dry plain and the low well-irrigated plain of the Po river valley, resulting from an intensive agriculture. The typical farmstead here follows an architectural model strictly correlated to the agrarian arrangement and property. In the water rich Po valley, South of Milan, the model settlement is a continuous series of buildings forming a solid perimeter around an open courtyard.

The open space is the farmyard, which was originally used to place sheaves and for threshing cereals. In the high plains, North of Milan, the courtyard, is smaller.

The farms here are high, gathered together, with lots of space for each farmer, wooden balconies and indoor barnyards.

After the Second World War, the growing urbanization in agricultural areas interlaces agriculture and industry.

The radical change in social and territorial aspects between 1946 and 1960 lead to a transformation in Lombard agriculture which was an unprecedented.

Though it is under the growing pressures of urban expansion, the environmental and economic value of the area around Milan is still of primary importance: more than 250 million euro worth of gross saleable products. The demographic growth of metropolitan areas lead to an expansion of the urban area, absorbing 65 farmsteads inside the borders of the city.

All these settlements synthesise both the model of Po valley, telling well the history of its land and production. Many of them have been altered, transformed, abandoned.

Almost all, for the great housing' demand, for central government are attractive as volumes to rebuild.

For local population, suffering a growing lack of local identity, they are still symbols of a fragile identity to protect and preserve. It is needed to understand if these settlements can have today a significance role in constructing urban and peri-urban space, in the territory's development and in the agricultural landscape.

2.2. Looking for significance

According to the Ciav recommendations on vernacular heritage, the first question was recognising the links between local features, environment and agricultural production. Recognising

has to be follow by the involvement and support of the community, as required needed for continuing use and maintenance of recognised heritage.

In order to find these solutions, the method started by analysing the schemes advised by ICOMOS-CIAV Charters, where scheme of planning conservation, through scientific research, inventories, classification, evaluation and development studies, with the involvement of the local community and publications aimed at informing public opinion are asked. (ICOMOS,1992).

Understanding if rural vernacular heritage is still a resource for the land must entail a rethink of approaches to be adopted, developing a recording method able to define how to plan their future in a changing society.

2.3. Path of the research

The determination of significance will raise a number of questions about authenticity and originality that in turn raise questions of relative value and enhancement.

The first principles to be considered the significance of this heritage were set out in some details in UNESCO guide lines of the UNESCO Convention of 16 November 1972 concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

To assign a method to the survey, the criteria set by ICOMOS have been analyzed. Since the beginning it was clear that indicators to read the cultural heritage coming by agricultural production have to come from economic production and local conditions. They must be related to the links between land, farm, buildings and production of each country in the world. The research carried out interpreting the significance of rural vernacular heritage in an urban territory, started by reading the influences of farming on special relationships with the site.

The path of the research followed the main steps included:

1. Analysing local agriculture and effects on land, people and buildings
2. Looking at the rural settlements in the city
3. Reading features of rural settlements at different layer, from large context to local one.
4. Devising the relationships able to telling the history and the meaning of the settlements
5. Analysing the potentiality and the criticism of each settlement
6. Building a database able to elaborate all the data collected
7. Defining a preliminary grid of the rural settlements, able to cooperate to the governance of new identity in the urban area.

The English Heritage is one of the most careful level of governance of rural heritage in Europe. It specifies how setting farmsteads are an integral part of the countryside and their assessment for designation ought to take some account of their setting and the field and settlement patterns around them. Because farming is a multi-functional activity, farm buildings depend more than most on their context, not only within the wider landscape but also in relation to their immediate neighbours, including the farmhouse (English Heritage, 2007). In order to answer to these wide chances offered by rural heritage, the research read them at different level, from close to farm and agriculture to far (Fig.1), following the point of view of local administrators and inhabitants of the city.

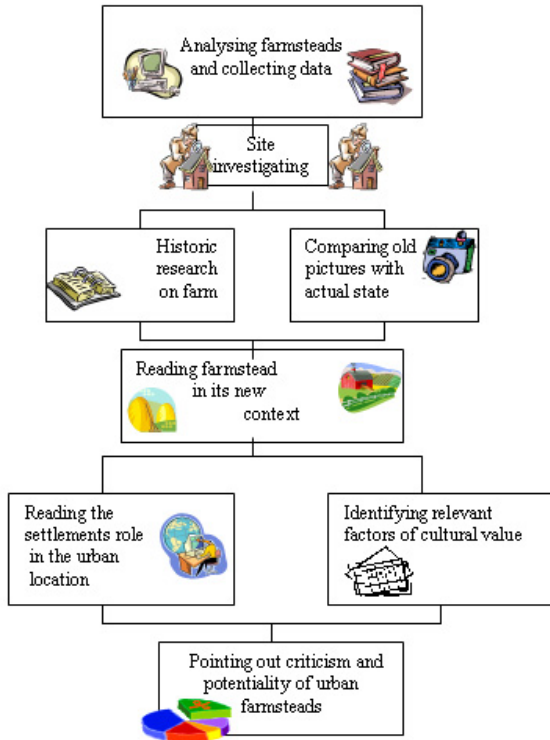


Figure 1. Synthesis of levels in reading rural settlements.

2.3. Different levels of reading

2.3.1 Local level

In the first steps the farmsteads were analysed looking at their past and evolution. The type of data gathered in this phase includes history of farmstead, its uses in the times, the structural evolution, the main application and planning indications of the council for its area and location. In order to better define the alterations and changes, historic pictures were compared to new one, from the same point of view (figures 2 and 3). All the data were collected in a package of simple software to help organizations at the local level collecting, managing, analyzing and presenting rural vernacular indicators data.



Figure 2. A view of the farmstead in 1970



Figure 3. The farmstead of fig. 2 in 2007 by the same point of view

2.3.2 Context level

At context level the settlements were analysed in order to read their ability to generate new identity and sense of place. On these premises, joining the recommendations by ICOMOS charter to effects of local agricultural production, some factors were chosen, as generating elements of local identity (fig. 4). They were set up to assess the authenticity and integrity of rural settlements analysed. In the next step, crossing the data the chances and the significance of each settlements analysed within the planning of the urban area were pointed out. When considering a rural settlement for defining its significance the following points have been considered as “generating elements of local identity”:

Authenticity, comprising:

- Traditional Management: looking for a traditional structure and management of the settlements, both to agricultural point of view and of its landscape.
- Rural context: surviving links with the agricultural production or chance to create them (availability of land and good soil).
- Settlement Form: elements identifying a particular settlement form linked to the place.
- Structural Conditions: valuing general condition of structural conservation, subdividing in three conditions:

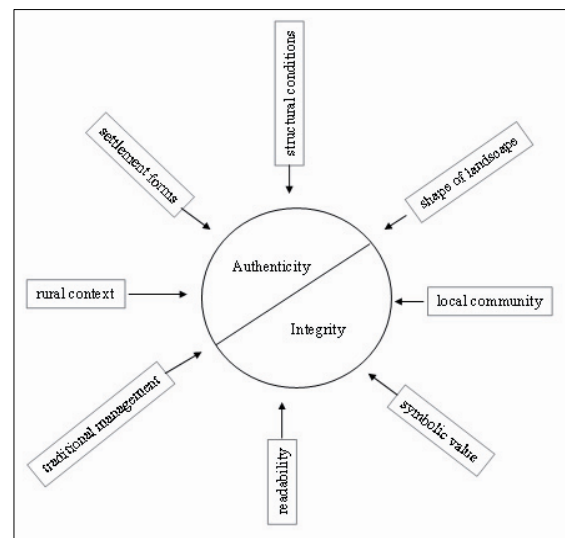


Figure 4. A conceptual view of the main generating elements of local identity analysed

- good: totally recognisability
- middle: partially altered.
- lost: crumbling elements Integrity, comprising:
- Shape of landscape: agricultural and urban components of the scenarios close to the farmstead.
- Local community: as necessity to involve people, requiring them and making them aware of their own heritage
- Symbolic Value: , as intangible aspects regarding the place in the “genius loci” belonging to local community.
- Readability: it indicates the possibility to recognise local features in the settlement analysed. Looking at this feature it is fundamental to get what happened through the modifications of use undergone during the time by the set/component; evaluating whether the functional relationships are still present in the analyzed element.

Each one of these factors were subdivided in different features, in order to be more recognisable. In the sample of settlement form (figure 5), the elements investigated included:

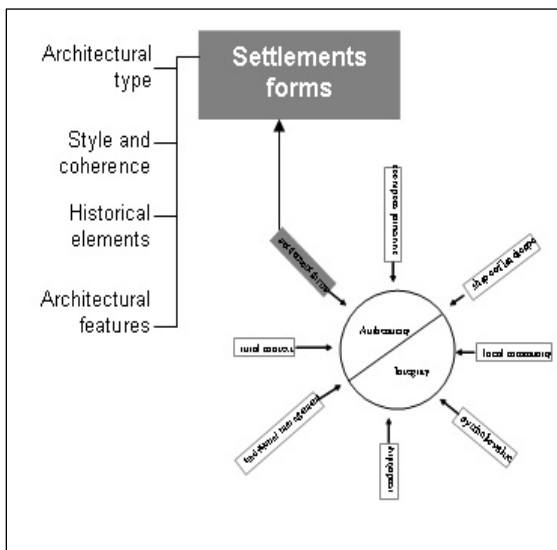


Figure 5. Sub-factors of settlement forms

- Architectural type: individualizing the disposition of farm building or grouped built structures. Looking at the local model preliminarily found in the analysed site, it can be: open or close barnyard, rectangular or square courtyard.
- Style and coherence: analysing the alterations and the changes of structural and architectural elements in the years. Farms are working places that have had to adapt in order to remain useful. Far from being dismissed as destructive alterations, evidence for change can sometimes be the key factor in determining their significance role in the sense of place.
- Historical elements: to analyze the presence and the use of local resources.
- Architectural features, identifying buildings and structures of special interest.

2.3.3 Criticism and opportunities

This first approach to read the rural settlements was finalised to understand criticism or potentiality of each case analysed.

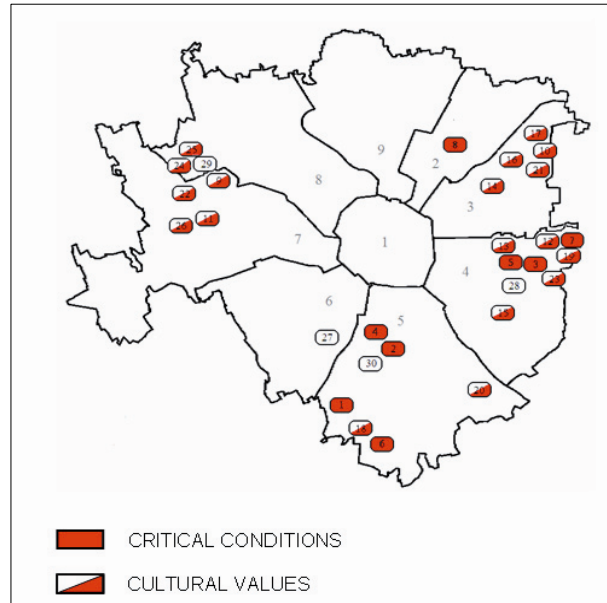


Figure 6. General map of state of significance of rural settlements in Milan

This was a significant step towards the creation of a general map of state of significance of rural settlements in Milan (Fig. 6). To read the potentiality were analysed factors as: availability of financial resource, interest of landowner (more of 40 rural settlement belong to the Council), conservation conditions, needs of rehabilitation, possibilities of repair, relevance of the context, interest of inhabitants, presence of detractor elements, as environmental or landscaping pollution etc. All data were compared for measuring the performance of the rural settlements, as potential policy sensitive indicators, in order to stop the decadence of the heritage (Fig. 7)

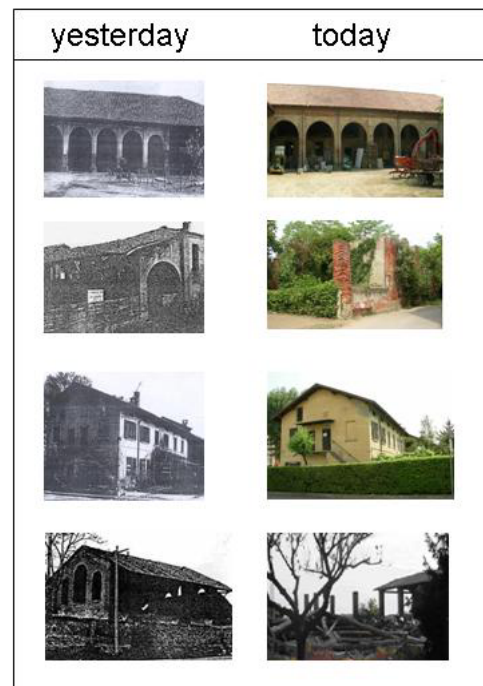


Figure 7. Sign of decay in rural settlements of the city

3. CONCLUSIONS

ICOMOS recommends the broadening of conserving the vernacular architecture from the narrow circles of a pure architectural culture to frame it in a more general planning context of local and regional planning policies and practices. The European Parliament with the resolution 2006/2050 called to create a legislative framework to guarantee the protection of the European natural, architectural and cultural heritage in rural regions. These ideas should become part of management planning of urban and rural areas, looking at a sustainable development. In the growing of urban areas, the centre absorbs the periphery and the town absorbs the countryside. When vernacular rural heritage is absorbed in urban areas its management opens important questions: what is the destiny of vernacular rural heritage? Should it be pulled down and substituted or could it still play a key role in the quality of town life? Everywhere in the world, the type of urban-central development makes way to an extensive, policentral, non-hierarchical and the birth of economic areas with a larger range of action, where there are no longer urban zones or rural zones, but multifunctional zones that oblige to a new way of considering the strategic lines of territorial management. Everywhere in the world, yet small communities and regional authorities also possess cultural heritage resources of great value. To get when they are still linked to the context development and agriculture means to understand how to manage them to enhance local cultural identity in developing contexts. ICOMOS charters define also people's awareness as one of the most important points in order to ensure safeguarding this heritage. Sometimes it includes also the local government's awareness. The knowledge of the farmstead intrinsic value it is the basis to make aware local community of the future role in a changing context. The study in Milan included more of 65 rural settlements. Many of them resulted still vernacular. Starting by Icomos recommendations, the research defines operative tools for evaluating, planning and designing a future for vernacular rural heritage in areas of urban expansion. The methodology proposed can be the frame within to develop the systematic survey for it. The criteria pointed out, involving definition of quality categories, can contribute to planning rural areas also if inserted in the highly dynamical characters of metropolitan areas. Our efforts is to propose to the council to consider their role in a general system layout, developing an integrated approach to the urban, cultural, natural and architectural environment able to enhance the identity and the quality of the life in the town.

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