

Branding4Resilience. Co-Design As A Tool to Enhance and Transform Inner Territories Through Architecture

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Inner territories are a central issue that is being discussed all over Europe. More than 60% of the European population live in peripheral contexts outside of main urban conurbations. Yet, the contexts addressed by the Italian National Strategy on Inner Areas – covering approximately the 60% of Italy and hosting nearly 13.5 million people – are often lacking successful regional policies and systemic territorial approaches to achieve effective transformations. In order to tackle with such fragile areas, a new development path has to be defined through the engagement of communities and the involvement of local actors. This contribution aims to present and discuss the results of a research project of relevant national interest in Italy, “Branding4Resilience” (B4R), that investigates fragile territories around the Italian peninsula. Branding is intended here as an engine to start processes of re-appropriation and re-settling in less-favoured areas. Enhancing small villages through minimal tourist infrastructures is thus only a starting point of a larger transformation path that aims at resilient communities and new open habitats. B4R provides expertise for co-designing actions and co-visioning scenarios, promoting a new use of heritage and local resources. B4R, exhibited at the Venice Biennale of Architecture 2021, explores and compares the 4 areas through an interdisciplinary perspective, operatively intervening on selected inner territories in Marche Region, Trento Province, Piedmont, and Sicily. A new role of these peripheral contexts in relation to growing metropolitan areas is investigated through explorative and collaborative design approaches involving communities. The focus of this contribution is the co-design phase of the project, that looked at paradigmatic cases in the four regions. The external and expert approach of the co-design workshops helped envisioning design solutions and systemic approaches that in the future will define tailored visions and strategic scenarios and guidelines in cooperation with public institutions.

INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT FRAMEWORK

This contribution aims to synthesise some of the first results of the ongoing research project “Branding4Resilience” (B4R),

funded by the Italian Ministry of Education and Research from 2020 to 2023 and involving 4 Italian universities and 31 researchers coming from different disciplinary backgrounds, being the disciplinary core of the project the architectural, landscape, and urban design and the real estate appraisal.

The project explores four inner territories in Italy, spanning from Sicily, to central Apennine, up to two Alpine regions which are identified as marginal areas.

B4R examines the local contexts and tests their ability to adapt to main global challenges by building “operative branding actions”. The main concept of the project is indeed to operate minimal design interventions on the tourist infrastructure as an impulse to reactivate the architectures and the places and increase their attractiveness for visitors in the medium term. In the long term this would potentially trigger positive and more structural territorial dynamics of revitalisation of the territory, possibly including processes of repopulation.

Distant from an interpretation of branding as territorial marketing, mainly projected towards touristic enhancement, B4R claims the role of branding as a multidisciplinary, transcalar, and multilevel process that starts from and with the community to unveil identity values, intrinsic qualities and unexpressed potentials. The research uses the tool of design – and specifically of co-design – to propose branding actions and strategies that, besides producing a higher attractiveness of the place, finally tend towards a more systemic transformation of the territory and hopefully a major resilience of the community. Therefore branding in this project is strongly tied to the idea of collaborative design, specifically addressed towards the reactivation of architectures and the enhancement of tangible and intangible heritage and landscapes, as well as towards the achievement of more resilient communities and habitats¹.

BACKGROUND OF INNER TERRITORIES

The debate on marginalised inner territories animates architects, urban designers and planners not only in Italy, but in all Europe. The pandemic sharpened their critical aspects which are depopulation, economic set-back, lack of services, fragility in the face of anthropogenic and natural risks. Since 2014

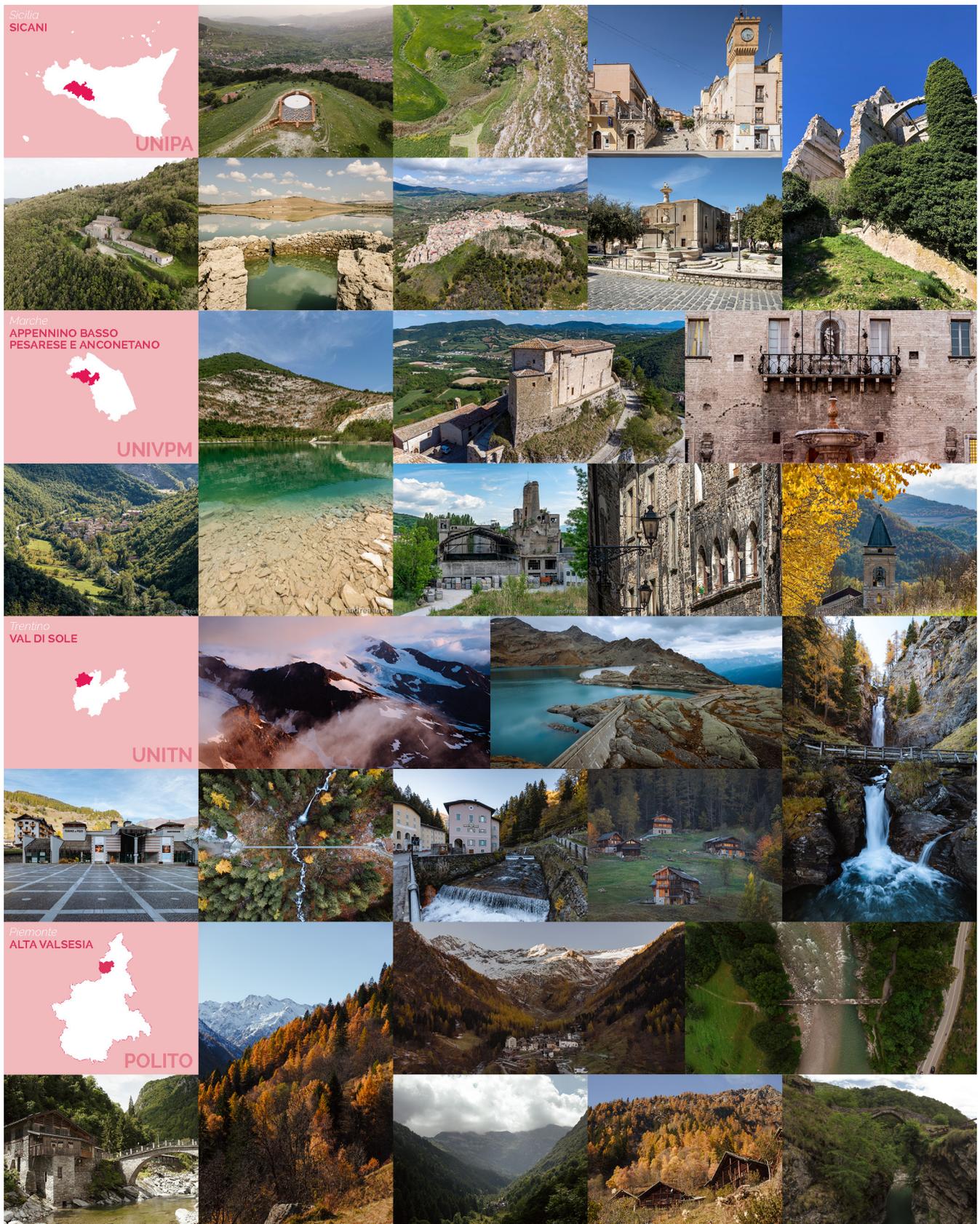


Figure 1. The contexts: the four Italian inner territories selected for the “Branding4Resilience” project. ©Branding4Resilience, 2020-2023.

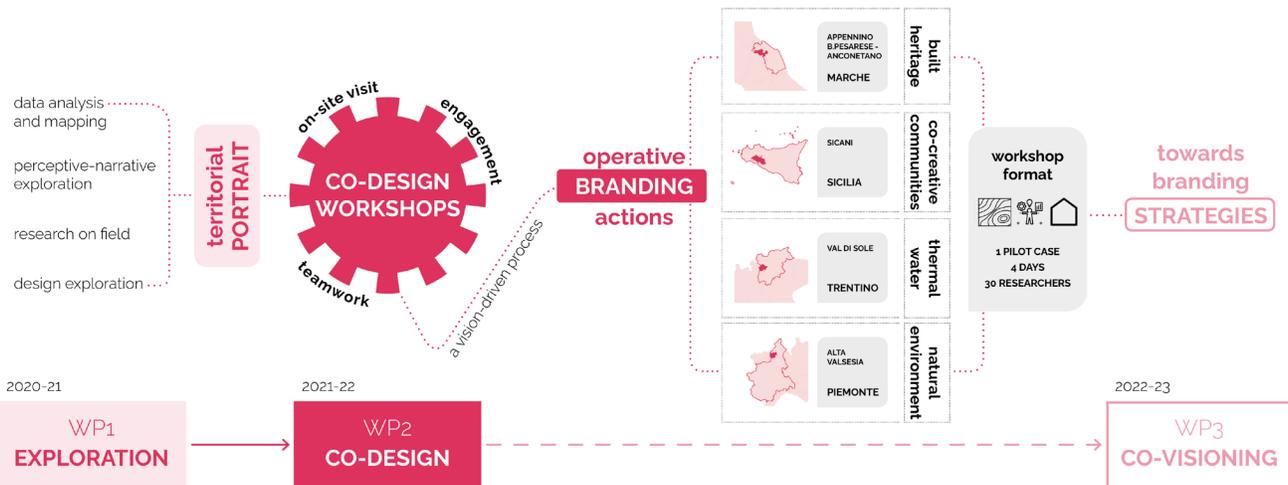


Figure 2. The methodology: the work packages and the role of the co-design phase in the project. ©Branding4Resilience, 2020-2023

Italy established a National Strategy of Inner Areas², a pioneer policy in Europe, aimed at developing these contexts. While SNAI's Italian experience represents an important test-field for operational experimentation and methodological innovations, there are also some obvious limitations and a number of implementation problems. For example, the need to include peripheral areas that are currently outside the areas covered by SNAI or to go beyond parameters that lead to standardizing and normalizing complex phenomena³ and to overcome the opposition between top-down and bottom-up actions, reinterpreting the place-based approach⁴.

Inner territories need to raise awareness of their hidden qualities and values⁵, to conceive peripheries as places of economic development and social innovation⁶; in this framework branding strategies and actions can be based on the rural identity and authenticity of these fragile and valuable areas^{7,8}. Inner territories ask for a processual and multi-sectoral approach able to develop places of spatial opportunities and keep together different interests, conflicts, but also potentials, and resources. Enhancing territorial capital and local resources is a key strategy for these areas, where often abandoned buildings or underused heritage need to be redeveloped. The identification of new functions represent a great opportunity to foster new residential incentives, and to create new tourist infrastructures and new spaces for public services. The redevelopment of obsolete and neglected buildings represent a great challenge for these small and fragile villages, as well as an opportunity to overcome critical issues related for example to maintenance costs for owners and administrations.

METHODOLOGY OF CO-DESIGN

In the complex framework and background sketched above, during the exploration phase we adopted a mixed methodology

based on quantitative and qualitative tools to investigate the four territories through four dimensions looking at infrastructures and landscapes; heritage and settlements; economies and values; communities and governance models. The second year, B4R went down to work on the territories, setting up four co-design workshops to speculate on possible meaningful transformation actions for the areas. The focus was on the dialogue with communities to envisage together design solutions for each context.

The co-design workshops have been possible thanks to the already acquired set of knowledge collected during the exploration phase and summed up in the territorial portraits elaborated by each research unit. The selection of a paradigmatic case within the larger focus area, as well as the curation of the workshop theme and the overall organisation was in charge of the hosting research unit.

Following interests and focuses of the exploration phase (e.g. built heritage, co-creative communities etc), each unit also addressed a specific theme to drive the design interventions. Nevertheless, each workshop covered a wide range of topics, also in line with the requests of residents and relevant actors involved in the process. For example some of the workshops worked with the recycling of abandoned buildings, others targeted more the development of large-scale strategies of transformation. Yet, the focus of each workshop was always co-design with a trans-scalar approach, which is the key element of B4R.

To set up the "operative branding actions" the role of architects has been crucial. Not only the one of the 'local' researchers of the hosting research unit, which were already in contact with the local administrations, but also the one of the 'new-coming'

researchers-designers from the other regions that could provide a fresh look to existing issues on the territory. The researcher community merged with the local one to collaborate in enhancing perception, experience, and potentials of each focus area, proposing *ad hoc* solutions to transform inner territories through architecture.

The format of the co-design workshop was consistently repeated at every appointment, even if minor adjustments and special tracks characterised its adaptation in each focus area. The workshop was based on a four day trip where all B4R researchers travelled from the rest of Italy to the selected context, with the hosting institution having set up the whole organisation and arrangements.

DAY 1: The first day of welcoming and approach to the area is also the occasion of dialogue with local actors and of public dissemination. Problems and issues are raised. The hosting research unit has a leading and essential role in summarising the results achieved during the exploration phase and in delineating clear and reachable objectives for the design, which have been previously agreed with the administrations and institutions involved in the co-design process.

DAY 2: The second day is dedicated to the physical exploration and narration of the territory. The whole research group travels around to catch a glimpse on field and to sense the character, identity, and taste of the area. Site visits to the design intervention areas are also scheduled. Storytelling is an important element during the day, as many protagonists alternate to tell about different places and bring forward needs and ideas. There is also time for short interviews. It is a day of conviviality that helps bonding together the design group and sewing new relationships, to breathe the spirit of the place and get in touch with the local community.

DAY 3: The third day is dedicated to co-design. Divided in groups and supervised by the local coordinator of the researcher unit, the researchers develop analyses and meta-designs on the assigned topic. Each group consists of 7 to 10 people and the participants of each university are mixed. The design teams also include local master and phd students and at least one local researcher that helps provide the knowledge background. Digital materials are already available on a shared virtual drive to facilitate the workflow.

DAY 4: The produced outcomes are presented and discussed on the fourth day in front of the local community and institutions to welcome feedback and comments that are useful for the follow up of the branding process.

After the workshop the co-design phase of B4R continues with the further elaboration of the design results towards an actualisation and an update of the envisaged ideas and to enable the third and conclusive phase of the project, the “Co-Visioning”

phase. These branding actions, developed for the specificity of the selected paradigmatic case (pilot case), will contribute to the definition of more general and strategic ideas for the whole focus area, applying again a transcalar approach to design, combining small and large scale, design and strategic view, into one territorial vision.

The role of the researchers-designers in the whole process is crucial. Through the intuitive and assembling capacity of design, the team is capable of analysing and reframing unresolved issues of the territory with a diverse perspective. The iteration of the process consistently showed the success of the approach, testified by similar positive feedback in all four contexts. On day four, most local communities and stakeholders were surprised by the achieved results in a short time and by the value of the proposals, assessing thus the validity of the overall methodology.

THE FOUR INNER TERRITORIES. FINDINGS FROM THE EXPLORATION

Academic research on territorially imbalanced areas is still in its early stages, as demonstrated by the prevalence of exploratory studies and the use of a variety of adjectives – such as “peripheral,” “marginal,” “inner,” and “inland” – to identify them⁹. These areas are often characterised by the progressive depopulation and the worsening of territorial inequalities in which the greatest efforts of public policies aimed at technological, infrastructural and service innovation have been fostered for years¹⁰. The SNAI operates a dual action in promoting the debate in the field as well as operational tools to counteract the processes of territorial marginalisation¹¹. The B4R approach considers not only the inner areas recognized by SNAI as those areas that are significantly distant from the supply centres of essential services (education, health, and mobility), but rich in important environmental and cultural resources, but also other territories characterised by fragile socio-economic contexts¹².

The B4R selected focus areas are four fragile inner territories (two Mediterranean regions and two Alpine areas) with small towns under 8000 inhabitants, generally characterised by aging population, progressive abandonment, economic stagnation, difficult accessibility, and access to primary services, degradation of the cultural and landscape heritage. Despite the diversity of many indicators and the peculiarities of each context, the integration of different qualitative and quantitative tools allowed for the structuring of a more comprehensive portrait of the Italian inner and marginal territories with a wider perspective.

B4R focuses on marginal areas whose touristic trends are decreasing or not constant throughout the year and thus can be improved by the development of minimal tourist infrastructures. These territories need to be enhanced by attracting new residents and tourists and by creating new employment opportunities and local development. Each explored territory offers



Figure 3. The workshops: the journey around Italy to meet the local communities and co-design the places. ©Branding4Resilience, 2020-2023

the presence of high natural capital at risk due to severe natural and anthropic vulnerabilities. However, some FAs (Appennino Basso Pesarese-Anconetano, Val di Sole, and Sicani) show an impactful transformation of the landscape and of the territorial structures that, in some areas, can significantly compromise biodiversity and natural resources due to anthropogenic pressure and urban development. The conditions of marginality of the FAs in certain contexts do not represent a weakness but a positive impulse towards enhancement processes. This is the case of the Alta Valsesia FA where the marginal condition helped to protect the natural resources and today offers a unique condition of balanced coexistence of landscape and urban settlements.

The villages and settlements have a rich variety of tangible and intangible heritage that are often not used or adequately enhanced. The built heritage is also characterised by the presence of protected buildings in historical centres but also in rural areas and diffused settlements. In all FAs, the diffused presence of high value buildings does imply the care and good conservation levels of this heritage that represent a cultural landscape value but also the legacy of the past. In addition, the territories of Appennino Basso Pesarese-Anconetano, Alta Valsesia and Sicani show a large presence of abandoned buildings which is coupled by an increasing percentage of the population

over 65 years old. What emerged from all the FAs is that the condition of isolation of the settlements has to some extent contributed to the conservation of their qualities. However, the lack of linkages and connections to material and immaterial systems highlighted the need to act towards a major integration in cross-cutting networks, be they cultural, political, or governance-related ones.

THE FOUR CO-DESIGN WORKSHOPS

The first co-design workshop of the B4R project was held in Sicily, in Sicani territory, in the municipality of Santo Stefano Quisquina (SSQ). The SSQ territory includes the Hermitage of Santa Rosalia, part of a religious path called Itinerarium Rosaliae, and the Andromeda Theatre, an open-air theatre designed by the shepherd-sculptor Lorenzo Reina. The Hermitage and the Theatre are resources that already attract significant tourist flows that, however, do not move to the urban centre of SSQ. Above all in the social history of this community the roots can be found that allowed the experience of the co-design workshop. The workshop suggested operative branding actions to relaunch the small urban centre, today fragile and unattractive. As emerged from the preliminary discussions with local actors and then during the debates on the days of the co-design workshop, entitled “Traces of water”, SSQ is layered with numerous ‘territorial materials’, both natural and

artificial, that remain as traces of the presence of water, and the history of SSQ tells of the population's great attachment to water, which has always been perceived as a public good to be protected through sustainable and local management. The proposed actions aimed at envisaging performative and cultural events to involve active citizens and creative communities. The metaphor of water was declined in project visions aimed at making water not only a resource to be guarded and protected, but the element on which to reconstruct the collective territorial imaginary, starting from the rediscovery of the present traces of water, the rethinking of forms of tourism and the valorisation of the already existing human capital of artists and craftsmen: the co-creative communities. In particular, the establishment of an eco-museum of water was proposed as a territorial landmark for the care, protection, management and valorisation of SSQ territory: a device made up of new spaces such as the 'house of water' imagined in an abandoned building near the source of the Magazzolo river. Also, a new community hub for storytelling was envisaged as a place to create stories on the rediscovery of a common territorial identity. The hub becomes a catalyst for future projects and a vehicle for narrating the territory and its community to the visitors.

The second co-design workshop was held in the Marche Region (central Italy). The focus area is the Appennino Basso Pesarese-Anconetano, a rural-mountain area in the northern part, characterised by a polarised settlement structure with heritage mediaeval villages and traditional rural settlements, important natural areas and water landscapes, renown regional food products, numerous protected and listed buildings, and a general diffuse quality of the historical centres and architectures. The main topic of the Università Politecnica delle Marche research unit (UNIVPM), which curated this workshop, is 'built heritage'. Therefore the co-design, with the title "The Sentino River Creative Park", focused mainly on the recycling of the rich abandoned productive heritage along the river in the pilot case of Sassoferrato. Additional topics were sustainable mobility and the natural landscape of the river banks. The preliminary "Exploration" phase highlighted a condition of ambiguous dynamics in which progressive depopulation and increase in soil consumption go hand in hand. At the same time, positive trends regarding the creative impulse of many change-makers and social innovators in the region must be mentioned. Using design as a tool of exploration, the co-design workshop imagined new uses and creative transformations of the abandoned buildings. We worked on a 19th cent. pasta factory and on a concrete factory of the 20th cent., proposing them as a new food lab and a knowledge centre for residents and visitors, augmenting thus the attractiveness and the relevance of the place in the region. In this sense and logical framework also abandoned and underutilised buildings become significant and worthy elements for the inner area, to be transformed as incubators of innovative ideas, as catalysts of beauty and new social relations. The buildings, legacy of the proto-industrial past of Sassoferrato, become hubs for education, technological

production, and innovation transfer, thus contributing to an overall territorial promotion of the area. The idea of recycling old structures, rural buildings, alpine huts, or empty factories to reactivate them with innovative uses, producing positive impacts on the area in a multiscale view of the territory, is a common element that we encountered in all workshops. This heritage is very valuable for Italian inner territories. It should be acknowledged, mapped, further investigated, and proposed as a strategic asset and a shared resource of communities for more resilient and inclusive territorial futures.

The co-design workshop organised in the Val di Sole was the third workshop and it was intended to pursue leadership in innovating with nature in small thermal villages of the Val di Sole focus area. The Università degli Studi di Trento (UNITN) assumed the water in thermal landscape as the project theme by focusing on small thermal villages in the mountain areas of Val di Sole. Since the valley is strongly characterised by blue infrastructures that generate precious resources and cultural and economic values (i.e., hydroelectric power stations, mineral water bottling plants, spas, and wellness centres), the co-design process focused on the values and the risks related to water. The co-design workshop, titled "Immerse in the Val di Sole. A collaborative transvalley strategy to discover, enhance and promote the shapes of water" was conceived to deeper investigate the territory through the waters' traces. Indeed, through design explorations and in-field experiences, some of the territorial challenges were addressed and deepened. A particular attention was paid to the value of the whole water system, by promoting the reuse and enhancement of elements that are part of their territorial capital, as well as to blue and green infrastructures, able to create healthier and greener living habitats and to activate urban and regional regeneration processes. During the four-days intensive workshop, three specific themes – "territories of proximity", "co-creative communities", and "new forms of living" – were addressed offering strategies and project proposals to support resilient communities in the upper Val di Sole. Across these strategic concepts and design ideas, the natural capital, with its wide variety of natural assets (i.e., plants and animal species), has emerged as the common ground. In fact, in Val di Sole, the thermal water landscapes could become the backbone for tackling water risks and enhancing natural ecosystems. The final collective and collaborative vision was to create a territorial strategy on the value of water resources by promoting the enhancement of the territorial capital through spatial transformation.

The fourth co-design workshop was held in Varallo, in the Piedmont Region (Northern Italy). The focus area is the Alta Valsesia, an alpine area in the northern part of the region, which includes 17 municipalities and numerous small hamlets. The progressive depopulation and aging of the population represent very critical issues for most of these municipalities, where even a large part of the built heritage is at risk, as it is often abandoned or only partially used. Although many



Figure 4. Lessons learnt: blue and green infrastructures and recycling of abandoned buildings. ©Branding4Resilience, 2020-2023

settlements are not easily accessible by car, a dense network of paths connects hamlets and side valleys, located in a natural environment that is often still uncontaminated. The “Exploration” phase highlighted that two lateral valleys (Val Sermenza and Val Mastallone) represent very strategic areas to be enhanced, both for their vulnerability and for their values. Therefore, these fragile areas were selected as a pilot case for design activities, with the aim of enhancing the mountain environment and traditional Alpine architecture, by taking the existing itineraries that connect some mountain pastures of the two valleys as important design references. The co-design workshop was organised in March 2022 by the research group of Politecnico di Torino, in close collaboration with the Unione Montana dei Comuni della Valsesia, and it was entitled “VIBRÈ. Enhancement strategies to make the resilient villages of Alta Valsesia vibrant”. The attention was focused on the concept of “territorial vibrancy”, that was translated in 3 co-design themes. The first theme was called “Buğèsi” - which in the local dialect means walking, but also arriving and riding - and it was focused on the theme of slow mobility, accessibility and connection between the 2 valleys. The second one was called

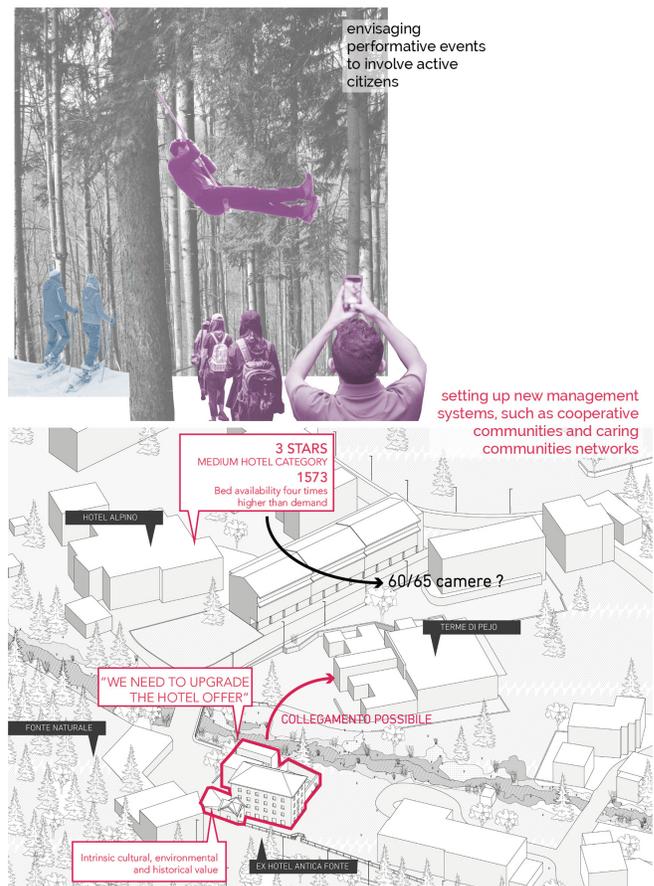


Figure 5. Lessons learnt: culture and events for communities and new networks. ©Branding4Resilience, 2020-2023

“Alègru!” - which means having fun, but also connecting and sharing - and it was focused on the socio-economic and cultural reactivation of these territories for a very specific target: young people. The third one was called “Farmèsi” - which means stopping, but also contemplating and sleeping - and it was focused on the preservation and redevelopment of typical local architecture, especially the mountain huts next to the high pastures.

LESSONS LEARNT AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

With the exploration and the co-design experiences B4R contributed to create dialogues in the local communities, to raise attention on critical aspects of the inner territories, to point out potentials and resources. Co-design workshops have played an important role in repositioning architecture at the centre of the debate on the regeneration of marginal areas, producing concepts, visions, and new narratives. At the base of this approach is a collaborative and participative design and planning action that involves citizens and experts in the fields. The co-design experiences showed the importance of the hosting research unit in coordinating and accompanying the design process to

help solving conflicts and addressing the ideas towards a wider territorial consensus.

The relevance of the architectural intervention in setting the basis for more resilient and inclusive habitats is strengthened by the branding strategy. The focus on spatial design of tourist infrastructures in selected small villages as agents of larger transformation paths is crucial in this sense. B4R conveys a special approach to branding in inner territories, one that goes beyond the definition of territorial marketing, placing the transcalar project at the centre. Indeed, branding in B4R connects to the broad and multidimensional role of the project as a collaborative expression of purposes and as a means for envisioning integrated future scenarios. The envisaged “operative branding actions” face urgent challenges for each place, but at the same time aim to become paradigmatic cases, useful for other contexts. An ex-post evaluation of the impacts of these branding actions in the different focus areas is a goal and a future perspective for the continuation of the B4R project.

Design explorations and project themes emerged during the co-design workshops highlighted the capacity of design of grasping intuitively and perceptively the quality of a place and the possibility to empower communities with coordinated interventions. Yet, the overall exploration pointed out the need to address the challenges of inner territories in a multi-faceted way. With these experiences we learnt that in such multilayered contexts there is even more need to:

- face complexity with a multidisciplinary approach using the inventive and visionary capacity of design to look at ‘ordinary’ problems with a fresher look;
- explore with on-field research and innovative tools;
- engage people to trigger the resilient and regenerative capacity of communities;
- test practical and viable solutions at hand, such as minimal and temporary interventions.

In these contexts design can:

- enable the conditions to live in better balance with nature, ensuring more resilient futures;
- activate a new sense of proximity and entanglement between community and habitat;
- co-design beautiful spaces through collaborative approaches and the invention of a new social and aesthetic dimension of sharing.

The B4R project will further investigate how strategies, policies, and projects can contribute to define new alliances between inner territories, bigger cities and coastal areas, to offer more attractive habitat conditions to local communities and to potential new inhabitants, while enabling innovation and creative processes. The research goes on in the last year of the project, working with the communities on co-visioning territorial

strategies at regional scale with the direct involvement of local and regional stakeholders. This collaborative approach is one of the main legacies of B4R for these Italian territories.

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