

# COMMUNITIES' SUSTAINABLE EXPERIENCES

SOLUTIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE, RESILIENT,  
INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE REGENERATION OF RURAL  
COMMUNITIES ENABLING LOW CARBON FOOTPRINT  
LIFESTYLES AND BUSINESSES.

EDITED BY  
SALVATORE DI DIO

Altralea  
EDIZIONI

# COMMUNITIES' SUSTAINABLE EXPERIENCES

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Salvatore Di Dio

*Atrilinea*  
EDIZIONI

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# LIVING THE TRANSITION IN THE INNER AREAS OF SICILY VALLEDOLMO 2030: SUMMER SCHOOL WORKSHOP CAMPUS ASIA 2023<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The energy, ecological and digital transition is strongly emerging in the European cultural and social landscape, influencing local practices and policies, and redefining some of the architectural design's themes. Within this frame, the paper focuses on the theme of transition through the continuity of the research-action by LabCity Architecture (DARCH-UNIPA) in synergy with the Municipality of Valledolmo, fitting into a broader program of transformation of the Minor Centers within the territories included in the Trasversale Sicula.

Addressing the topic of housing transition in the Minor Centers in Sicily allows to deepen the specific issues of temporary housing, in order to develop modalities, methodologies and design approaches through the experimentation of Social Housing Community, a new way of thinking about the dwelling within the idea of a social and changing community. This kind of innovative urban project aims to improve and enhance the existing material and cultural heritage, along with public space. By contributing to the definition of new ways of living that can support ecological and energy transition, the projects elaborated combine open space- layouts together with residences, for a renewed community, as to accommodate migrant families, self-sufficient elderly people, and young returning graduates to live temporarily in Valledolmo.

# RESEARCH-ACTION, SOCIAL HOUSING COMMUNITY, ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION, SUSTAINABILITY, INNER AREAS, VALLEDOLMO

<sup>1</sup>This paper is the result of a shared reflection of the authors. However, for the sole purpose of competition evaluations, the paragraph 'The frame of the research' is to be attributed to Renzo Lecardane, the paragraph 'A political project' is to be attributed to Zeila Tesoriere, the paragraph 'Valledolmo: research-action laboratory' is to be attributed to Paola La Scala and the paragraph 'Valledolmo 2030: living the transition' is to be attributed to Bianca Andaloro.

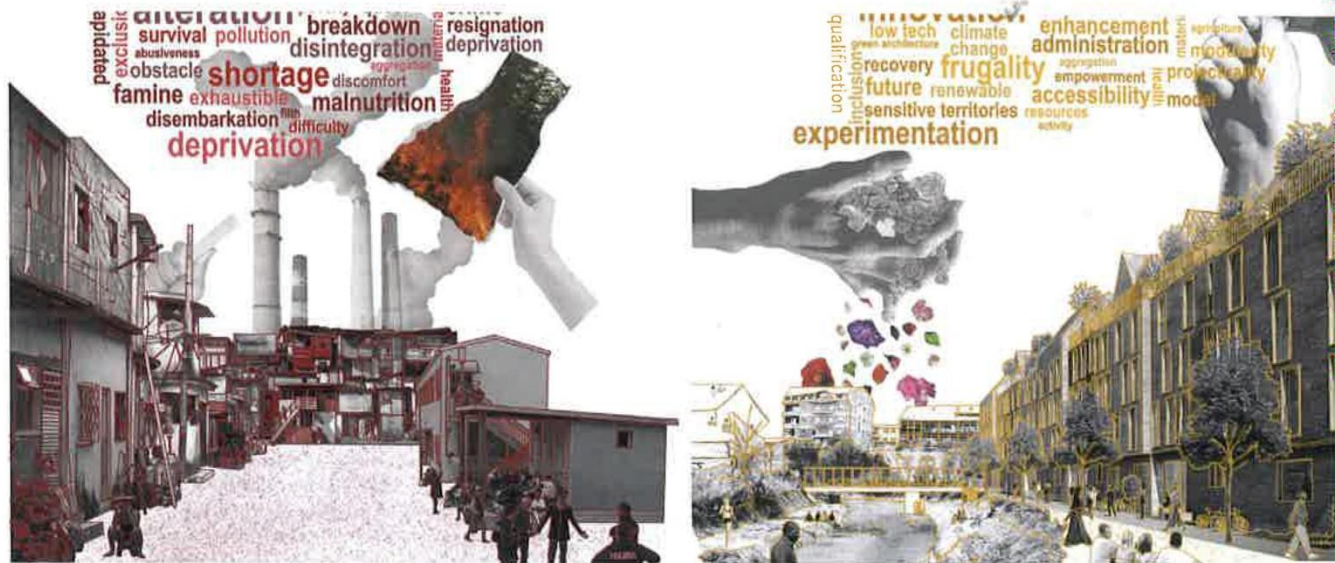


Fig. 1

### THE FRAME OF THE RESEARCH

Depopulation of the smaller centers is the most obvious result of a crisis, which has been going on for some decades now, and which has led to a progressive emptying out of the urban fabric as well as the divestment of essential basic services due to the related economic and demographic crisis. This crisis, which has endured for several years now, resulted in young people abandoning the territories, together with the divestment of essential services, like schools, health and infrastructure. This is accompanied by the progressive emptying out of the urban fabric subject to a similar fate that marks the abandonment of entire portions of residential blocks and increasingly disused craft or industrial areas. Collapses, demolitions and protective fences now mark the most affected neighborhoods, testifying to the serious situation underway affecting small communities [Teti, 2022]. Such conditions make it possible to bring together different projects in the inner areas and in national and regional territories, mainly focusing on cultural models, rather than on the economic ones. In this context, researching in such territories with often unexpected fragilities and potential, parallel if not alternative to the well-known «Strategia nazionale per le aree interne (SNAI)<sup>2</sup>», can help reactivate these territories towards virtuous and resilient paths. Research on the processes of depopulation and abandonment of small towns is crucial to lay the scientific foundations, also to support local administrations, to concretely reflect on a proactive methodology and activate possible cultural, economic and urban strategies aimed at their revitalisation. It is evident that the proposal to trigger regenerative processes in a context such as that of the Minor Centres is the foundation of this research, built in the past years through community-oriented relations in synergy with public subjects, associations and citizens. The definition of the fieldwork method was developed through a direct interaction between different knowledge, both local and international, to try to understand the complexity of relational processes [Lecar-

dane et al., 2021). Furthermore, researching on the processes of depopulation and abandonment of small towns allows to create a relatable and scientific foundations, in order to support local administrations to concretely reflect on a proactive methodology and activate possible cultural, economic and urban strategies for their revitalisation. In this frame, the design of the *Trasversale sicula*<sup>3</sup> suggests a new imagery of the Sicilian hinterland, as a turning point in the renewed relationship of the rural territory with the urban framework of Sicily's large and medium-sized cities. Resources and potential are evident along this ancient road of over 650 kilometres<sup>4</sup> that connects numerous inland settlements: from the Punic site of MOTHIA to the ancient Greek city of KAMARINA. The backbone of inland Sicily, the *Trasversale sicula* crosses 8 provinces, 55 municipalities, 6 archaeological parks, 7 nature reserves and 47 sites of historical-archaeological-monumental interest. It also offers an unprecedented panorama of some 200 habitats of Community interest that are attributed to one of the highest values of plant biodiversity in the entire Mediterranean basin. In addition to the resources of the natural territories, it also raises awareness of the rich heritage of monumental, archaeological, historical-artistic and ethno-cultural assets, which provide useful elements which can help relating the Minor rural centres to the *Trasversale sicula*. The resulting framework aims at the valorisation of the emblematic places with a view to a broader strategy and vision linked to the local specificities about protection, transformation and sustainability of the actions proposed by the research. While the main objective is the identification of a network of small municipalities who can support the promotion of the transformations connected to the enhancement and production of culture, the actions stimulate the interconnection between sectors relating to the economic and urban spheres, consolidate relations between communities and territories, and finally trigger temporary and permanent virtuous processes. Finally, a common thread links the action-research projects to similar

<sup>2</sup>The objective of the 2012 SNAI, which started in 2014, is the identification of a limited number of so-called prototype areas, by each Region and Autonomous Province, to initiate a learning process and replication of the virtuous mechanisms identified, to reverse the current demographic trends in the fragile territories identified and to promote development projects aimed at enhancing the natural and cultural heritage. <sup>3</sup>The route that crosses the entire centre of Sicily, today made up of a collection of ancient *trazzere* or former railway roads, was studied and traversed between 2016 and 2017 by a group of archaeologists and passionate walkers who joined the *Trasversale Sicula* Association, which mapped and geo-referenced it, thanks to the collaboration with the LabGIS of the Sicilian Regional Tourist Observatory, identifying the main points of cultural and natural interest.



national and international experiences that represent some of the possible responses to the recent crisis of marginal territories capable of questioning the cultural model even before the economic one. In this context, the research on rural minor centres in Sicily focused on the town of Valledolmo, in order to define, from a productive territory with an agricultural character, new possible imaginaries in some emblematic places. The reference to the collective memory made it possible to discover the nature of certain spaces and to elaborate the preparatory questions for project strategies.

## A POLITICAL PROJECT

The narration of a new imaginary of the Sicilian hinterland is the foundation of the research that pursues the objectives of reversing the gaze and promoting innovation, building strategies for a political project capable of grasping the complexity existing in the territories of the minor rural centres in Sicily. In this political project, the migratory phenomena may constitute not only an opportunity for economic and cultural growth, but also for territorial and urban requalification. This is valid especially for the minor centres, if imagined as welcoming places and, consequently, through a perspective, aiming at favouring inclusion between migrant families and resident communities. Although the phenomenon of foreign immigration in Italy is not a recent one, it has always and mainly been approached with an emergency character. While the 1980s saw a long series of amnesties to regularise the presence of foreign citizens in Italy, in the 1990s, this practice became central in the public debate and transformed into a political issue [Colucci, 2022]. In these years, the state enacted the Martelli law abolishing the geographical limitation. At the same time, Italy adhered to the European Schengen agreements, which provided for the abolition of internal borders within the EU, and to the Dublin agreements, which provided for the examination of migrants' asylum applications by the first country of disembarkation. In 2011 Italy has faced several migratory flows along its shores, as well as the other Mediterranean countries, due to the political upheavals of some authoritarian regimes in Africa and the Maghreb. Through new migration routes in the Mediterranean, often hopeless voyages of hope, migrants are brought at great cost to cross-border European countries and, in particular, along the shores of Sicily. What drives the refugees of the new millennium is the urgent need to escape from countries, often torn apart by civil wars, where it is difficult to survive due to the loss of minimum essential rights and life itself [Colucci, 2022]. In 2022, according to Viminale data, about 105,000 migrants landed in Italy, of whom about 12,000 were unaccompanied minors. The main countries of origin declared upon their arrival are Egypt, Tunisia, Bangladesh and Syria. The data published by the Ministry of the Interior, Statistical Dashboard as of 31 December 2022, state that the Region of Sicily is among those most affected by the phenomenon of disembarkation and reception, albeit temporary, with a percentage of migrants slightly higher than 10% of the national territory [Ministero dell'Interno, 2022; IDOS, 2022]. Being aware of this phenomenon makes possible to tackle the migration flows by deleting the propagandistic characteristics of the emergency. On the contrary, it can allow attributing it the character of a structural phenomenon that can prove to be a

new economic and social resource to support the current and future society, which is demographically weaker and weaker like the Italian one. Therefore, it seems almost natural that minor centres, heavily marked by depopulation and abandonment, could welcome a new population, offer work -especially in rural areas-, as well as new housing, today in a state of decay or abandonment.

Even the Italian Constitution recognises the social rights of housing and education for all citizens, including migrants and unaccompanied minors: these are fundamental rights that can help reactivate, especially in small municipalities, essential services, such as schools and local healthcare for all kinds of residents. Any are the virtuous examples in Italy of municipalities that have begun their welcoming visions: for example, the municipalities in Valcamonica which, thanks to integration and micro reception projects, have managed to create new jobs for refugees and local young people who would otherwise be forced to emigrate. According to Sai's annual report of 2021, of the about 80 per cent of the municipalities involved in integration projects with migrants with a small population size, 42.8 per cent involve the inner areas, of which 74.6 per cent are "rural areas" [SAI, 2022].

## VALLEDOLMO: RESEARCH-ACTION LABORATORY

The action carried out in Valledolmo constitutes a methodology that aims to activate the militant role of the University within the concrete transformation of the territories and the communities empowerment through the re-appropriation of accessible space [Belle, 2013]. These then support the creation of imaginaries within a map of places, in order to differently grasp reality, overturn preconceptions and open unexpected rediscoveries. The research-action methodology thus presupposes a strong orientation towards experimentation and the ability to flexibly manage the design process, through an approach that compares spatial and constructive issues with the users' needs [Manzini 2018]. The heterogeneous panorama of the involved actors and places on which to intervene, as well as the diversity of the actions undertaken, accentuate the need to define strategies and tools for testing the intervention scenarios. Connected to this vision is also the awareness of marginality as a potential return for new generations, driven by innovation and by the possibility of working and studying remotely. The methodological approach of the research proposes then a dynamic vision of the territory through the redesigning of the *Traversale sicula*, focused on a broad system of relations between the territory of the minor centres and the more extensive one of the Metropolitan Cities. The design of a backbone that crosses Sicily as an ecosystem infrastructure that leads back to those natural, cultural and economic material and immaterial resources that are specific to this territory becomes then evident. Moreover, marginality can become a new potential of these places, apparently distant from the main travel flows, but able to provide services for collective wellbeing and cultural innovation, as during the Covid-19 pandemic. In Valledolmo, possible imaginaries have been defined through the design of an intervention programme starting from the definition of the urban and natural fabric into a number of strategic areas on which to operate. These are emblematic places selected to

<sup>4</sup> The ancient path of the *Traversale Sicula* was traced by the archaeologist Giovanni Uggeri from earlier research by the archaeologist Biagio Pace. <sup>5</sup> Significant, in this sense, is the case of a Tunisian community that settled in the Trapani area between 1968 and 1972 (in the territories between Mazara del Vallo and Castelvetrano) responding to the need for low-cost labor in the agricultural and fishing sectors in an area that, following the Belice earthquake (1968) and the approval of the Workers' Statute (1970), saw an increase in the abandonment of southern Italian cities towards the large cities of the North [Miceli, 1984].

re-establish the relationship between urban density and open space in which the plot of pre-existing gardens and orchards accommodate ecological corridors that reconnect with the extensive rural territory of the Fiumara Sciarazzi Valley. The morphology of the land not only structures the settlement principle but rather leads the natural paths of the Fiumara and the impluvial lines through the urban fabric within a collective experienced, between a topographical surface and a settled population within a new idea of space [Mininni, 2006,]. In this framework, the necessary change of pace is no longer that of isolated projects, in many cases resulting from the emergency, but takes the form of continuous actions aimed at reversing both the role of passive or isolated actors and the traditional forms of governance of decision-making processes. Therefore, research-action imposes a change of vision and perspective that cannot stop at the immediate but rather at transition, cultural, material and ecological, with the aim of governing change in the direction outlined by the United Nations with the 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The validity of the research also matures by strengthening project activities, promoting training and innovation, bringing in competences, skills and intelligences with community relations and through a working method that aspires to re-appropriate places, by welcoming migrants, within processes of concrete transformation. Working in these territories of doubt and uncertainty means undertaking a turnaround that aims at building a political project that is capable of grasping the existing complexity in order to understand it, recount it and consequently suggest new methods and actions for the territories of minor centers. In this frame, the interest for Social Housing Community is therefore part of this framework, made explicit and experimented in innovative urban projects which aim at improving and enhancing the existing material and cultural heritage, together with public space. In this way these contribute to the definition of new ways of living in relation to ecological and energy transition issues. In fact, Social Housing Community programme also includes the design of the open space intended for commercial and recreational activities, with the aim of establishing real communities of residents and transient inhabitants.

Therefore, it is believed that it can be an opportunity to revive and increase the presence of new inhabitants, albeit temporary, attracted by the desire to live healthy and well in a convivial and respectful atmosphere that can find an offer of minimum spaces suitable for reception, for short and long periods. These include qualified young coming back in their origin territories, the elderly, temporary travellers, students, artists, start-uppers, activists, and researchers who, despite their origin, can play a propulsive role in the construction of policies to attract those talents who can support economic and social fabric of the smaller centres. This temporary housing offer is complemented by the possibility of the permanent reception of migrant families, aggregating it with the definition of a social, urban and architectural framework for the creation of Social Housing Community residences, under the public direction of the municipal administration.

#### VALLEDOLMO 2030: LIVING THE TRANSITION

“Valledolmo Paradise 2030: Living the transition”, the latest

edition of the Summer School Campus Asia organised by Pusan National University (PNU) and the University of Palermo (LabCity Architecture, DARCH, UniPa) took place between June and September 2023, with the participation of five international universities. By means of mixed modalities, in remote mode during the first weeks, and in person for the conclusion of the activities as a workshop in Valledolmo, the event allowed to deepen the theme of minor centers with a trans-European and international outlook. In the occasion of the workshop, around forty students and teachers met in Valledolmo to reflect on the potential of small towns, starting from the understanding of depopulation phenomena. The summer school thus provided a pretext to develop the research-action method in order to identify transformative strategies for the territories, together with the local communities. Students from the Universities of Busan, Tongji, Kyushu, Vienna and Palermo developed a project for the Roccafana neighborhood in Valledolmo during the intensive workshop week. The neighborhood, which is currently in a condition of almost total abandonment and severe degradation, allowed the identification of some widespread and common social practices: in particular those connected to the morphology of the spaces, particularly taking places in the common areas. This critical reading of space, together with the programme actions identified to respond to depopulation issues, highlighted the crucial role of urban morphology in the design of shared spaces and the need for public spaces for the community. Each university therefore contributed to the design of

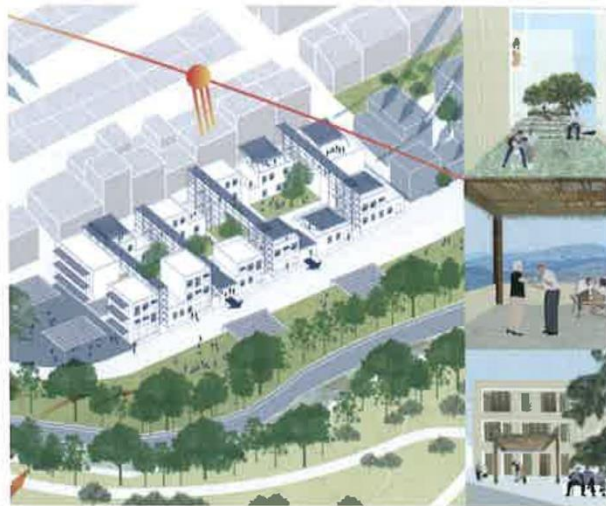


Fig.2

one of the five blocks in the project area, deepening, at the same time, the design of public spaces and of the edge of the Fiumara. The contribute of the two projects developed by University of Palermo is related to the block E, defining the northern and western perimeter of the Roccafana district of Valledolmo, bordering the Fiumara on one side and the urban fabric on the other. Within this context, the project “Neighbourhood in Transition. New living habitats” by the ‘Atepis’ Group of the University of Palermo focused on the theme of the fragmentation of the block, in order to transform it into a spatial device made up by private spaces and public

<sup>6</sup>Among them, the municipality of Belmonte Calabro, where a yearly auto-construction workshop regenerates the village in a multicultural atmosphere to serve the few residents (See: *La Rivoluzione delle Seppie*: <https://larivoluzionedelleseppie.org/>); or the municipality of Camini, which has supported the revival of local entrepreneurship through integration of young women [Tantillo, 2023]. <sup>7</sup> The theme of temporary living suggests, for example, the opportunity, developed from the experiences related to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, to incentivise the return of talented young people to their home territories, in order to counter the issue of depopulation through the development of productive activities.

space at different heights. Through a system of transversal and vertical connections between the buildings arranged on different heights, exploiting the strong slope that characterises the block, 'New living habitats' proposes a system of more or less temporary residences for the new inhabitants of the neighbourhood, together with new public aggregative spaces and collective services, which offer an accessible and sustainable solution to create social mixité processes from the intergenerational point of view and promote social bonding by activating generative welfare practices [Ben-Joseph E., 2005; Costa and Bianchi, 2020]. In particular, the integration between private spaces and common areas -terraces, gardens, vegetable gardens, equipped communal kitchens, laundries, worship spaces- duly designed and entrusted to community management, aims at consolidating proximity networks, creating virtuous environments [Lumino, 2015]. This tends to show the ability to tear down, rebuild and refound spaces that become dominant for a changing community that looks at architecture as a common good to be protected and on which to build a future [Molinari 2016].

The positive effects of this intervention extend beyond the immediate vicinity, creating beneficial ripple effects within the broader community. In view of the current poor state of maintenance of the buildings, the project focuses on their demolition and reconstruction, while maintaining their volume and settlement. In relation to its position with respect to the heliothermal axis and the direction of the flow of winds, the project identifies low-tech sustainable solutions, using light and natural local materials that allow the new constructions to be integrated with simplicity and minimal impact into the existing context of the Fiumara, such as double-covering devices and light shading.



Fig.3

In this sense, low-tech refers to a precise programmatic, operational, pragmatic choice to use materials and construction techniques within the reach of local workers, with reduced and economised consumption of energy, both for production and construction, with highly innovative results [Giglio, 2018]. Such a form of collaborative living shows its potential to be

an effective instrument of social change for the responsible participation of the actors involved, the sense of belonging to the urban space and community and the resulting processes of social inclusion [Bianchi and Lutri, 2018; Braubach M., Fairburn J., 2010] defining a new urban centrality. On the other hand, the second project, 'Instant Crush', developed by the Daelvasa group of the University of Palermo, is developed in strict relation with the morphological layout of the block. The steep slope that crosses the site longitudinally, in fact, defines an important interpretative key of the site, which has suggested the development of a system of connections, public or private, at different heights. Recalling the presence of a pre-existing long courtyard crossing the entire block, the project develops a greater density along the edges of the site, leaving space for a semi-public courtyard between two continuous slabs of dwellings. This system, regulated by the juxtaposition of a uniform grid, develops for about fifty meters, alternating public and private spaces with single-family residential units of different types. Due to the diversity of the needs of the inhabitants, either permanent or temporary, the project envisaged the development of simple and duplex units with private patios for permanent inhabitants, and duplex dwellings with loggias for temporary inhabitants. The former are arranged along the inner edge of the block, in order to guarantee better conditions of privacy; on the other hand, the latter, imagined for transient inhabitants involved in local production and exhibition activities, are located along the edge of the Fiumara, together with the commercial activities. By keeping the morphology of the ground intact, the theme of the slope constitutes a tangible means for the spatial transformation of the entire project area. Moreover, it allows for different temporalities and multi functions along the area [Scheinder, 2007; Till, 2005]. Finally, the system of residences ends up with a heading system that shapes the public and collective elements of the project. This consists of an open yet not covered space, capable of hosting temporary commercial activities, such as neighborhood markets, and being a catalyst of attractive events for the surrounding area, constituting a new pole of the Good Moviada [Lecardane, 2023]. Within this space, the project also envisages the development of activities primarily intended for the communities of the entire neighborhood, such as a communal kitchen for residents, accessible directly from the housing level.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the occasion of the workshop "Valledolmo Paradise 2030: Living the transition" explored the opportunity for deepening the ongoing research-action process and the collaboration with public administrations, in order to envision new potentialities and new spatial possibilities for the small centres in Sicily. Through a methodology based on the combination of research, education, and the confrontation with the public realm and its stakeholders, it has been possible to raise awareness on social topics by relating them to their spatial implications. Rethinking the new shape of the Roccafianara neighborhood has made it possible to develop a reasoning capable of going beyond the spatial relationship between the buildings and their surroundings, and, rather, capable of imagining the future inhabitants of the spaces and their social and spatial needs. Furthermore, for these

<sup>3</sup>The long experience conducted in Valledolmo by the Lab City Architecture over the past seven years has demonstrated the importance of action-research as a tool to explore contemporary research topics through continuous collaboration and discussion with local, national and international stakeholders and the local community.

<sup>4</sup>In order to formulate a possible response to depopulation and, at the same time, support the economic and cultural development of the small towns, the Workshop claimed for the neighborhood to be transformed with the aim of identifying new spaces and typologies for temporary and permanent inhabitants. In addition, each block would host different functions for the community. The critique of the planning assumptions formed the first part of each group's project development.

reasons, such a project proposal to regenerate Roccafanare district has resulted to be part of the future triannual planning released by the Municipality of Valledolmo (Piano Triennale delle Opere Pubbliche), for its potentialities in foreseen a valuable future for the territory. Within this framework of continuous interaction, the two projects developed by University of Palermo, aimed at exploring the possibility for new social housing typologies, by spatially relating the housing layout to the kind of inhabitants envisioned and, especially, by embedding in the private area the peculiarity of the collective and shared areas. Therefore, the regeneration solutions developed during the workshop have solicited the attention of practitioners, researchers and municipalities for their broad potential to impact the territory at a political, economic and social level. By addressing new temporalities and new uses, these design strategies provide possibilities for a shared, sustainable, and welcoming social housing neighborhood.

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<sup>10</sup>The Fiumara Valley defines the northern edge of the Valledolmo territory. Home to numerous natural ecosystems, the Fiumara is set to become a central node for the development of collective and public activities, starting with the securing of the riverbank and the redevelopment of the natural and urban edge. <sup>11</sup> The projects of the University of Palermo (scientific supervisors Prof. Z.Tesoriere, Prof. R.Lecardane) were developed by the PhD students of the ATEISIP group (tutor: PhD P.La Scala; C. Calvaruso, M. Cannata, E.Paccagnella, P. M. Torregrossa) and by the undergraduate students of the Daelvasa group (tutor: PhD B.Andaloro; Davide Crupi, Eloisa Gizzi, V. Rotella, S.Torregrossa).