

sous la direction de
LAMIA HADDA
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DANIELA PITTALUGA

Villages et quartiers à risque d'abandon

*Stratégies pour la connaissance,
la valorisation et la restauration*

TOME 1


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**Cultures pour la
conservation et la
valorisation du
patrimoine à risque
d'abandon en Italie**



HOLISTIC APPROACH TO THE MEDITERRANEAN ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE AT RISK OF ABANDONMENT: THE CASE STUDY OF MONTALBANO ELICONA (ITALY)



Argimusco
Plateau.
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November
2018
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Maria Luisa Germanà
Università degli Studi di Palermo-Italia

A conceptual and methodological renewal is needed in the field of formation, transformation and management of the built environment. This need also concerns the architectural heritage, a non-renewable resource threatened by various types of risk factors, including abandonment. A similar phenomenon (intended as a lack of usage, which leaves room for improper or harmful utilization) is juxtaposed with overuse (intended as too intense and continuous a usage), which today is even more unacceptable, due to the need for social distancing as part of the containment measures of COVID-19. There is a wide and varied case history regarding abandonment, with reference to possible causes and consequences. Some intrinsic factors (stratification, heterogeneity) and contextual (geo-political structure and financial crisis; territorial imbalances; overlap with the ordinary built environment, etc.) increase the risk threatening the Mediterranean architectural heritage; this is connected to the multifaceted cultural identity of this area and is a consequence of long-term factors, in which natural and anthropic aspects are interlinked. New or aggravating challenges place even more emphasis on the theme of the sustainable use of the architectural heritage, rooted in the culture of conservation ever since its inception and in a state of constant evolution. The paper proposes the village of Montalbano Elicona, with its wealth of remarkable natural and cultural heritage in north-eastern Sicily, as a significant case study for experimenting the application of a holistic approach (oriented towards a high quality *Baukultur*) to various design opportunities.

Keywords: Mediterranean Built Heritage; Historical town; Sustainable Use; Holistic Approach; *Baukultur*.

Specific risks in the Mediterranean architectural heritage

The built environment, also in the case of architectural heritage (CoE 1985), has a multiple essence that is the result of tangible and intangible factors and of dynamics deeply rooted in the specificity of the place, which can be better assessed from a multi-scalar perspective. For this reason, some particular characteristics can be observed in the Mediterranean architectural heritage, linked to the multifaceted cultural identity of this area, and considered as a consequence of *longue durée* factors, in which natural and anthropic aspects are intertwined (Brauduel 1985): 1) since ancient times, the Mediterranean has been a melting pot of cultures, facilitating contamination between different populations; 2) the continuing human presence in the same places, and a building culture not inclined towards substitution, have

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Lamia Hadda, Saverio Mecca, Giovanni Pancani, Massimo Carta, Fabio Fratini, Stefano Galassi, Daniela Pittaluga (edited by), *Villages et quartiers à risque d'abandon. Stratégies pour la connaissance, la valorisation et la restauration*, © 2022 Author(s), content CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 International, metadata CC0 1.0 Universal, published by Firenze University Press (www.fupress.com), ISBN 978-88-5518-537-0 (PDF), DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-537-0

determined a built heritage that often bears witness to stratifications from different eras, widespread throughout the region; 3) the wide and varied case history of the heritage presents a very heterogeneous picture in terms of level of knowledge, state of conservation and enhancement strategies.

Specific characteristics can also be identified in the risk to which the Mediterranean architectural heritage is exposed with regard to the global framework, in which the main threats to the *spirit of place* (ICOMOS 2008) derive from factors that have been out of control and increasing (climatic change, mass tourism, armed conflict and urban development) [www.icomos.org/en/get-involved/inform-us/heritage-alert/heritage-at-risk-reports]. In particular, intrinsic factors (stratification, heterogeneity) and, above all, contextual factors (such as: the intertwining with tangible and intangible aspects of the ordinary built environment; pressing contemporary needs conflicting with conservation; and imbalances between densely inhabited urban areas not far from internal areas, always or seasonally unpopulated) increase the complexity of the risk. Other specific contextual risk factors derive from the geo-political framework of the Mediterranean Sea, which has lost its ancient centrality, to become the border between southern Europe and the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) area, the scene of increasing and structural migratory flows. Furthermore, the continuing financial crises and a poorly *objective-based* mentality increase the criticality of the scenario, bearing in mind the fact that in the Mediterranean area the public authority usually plays a prominent role, both in the direct management of the architectural heritage and in the definition of relative guidelines.

Therefore, there is a pressing need for identify unitary strategies, based on a holistic vision, in order to effectively address risk factors and leverage opportunities, enhancing the potential of the architectural heritage, understood as both a tangible basis of cultural identity, and a cornerstone of regional development.

Risk of abandonment and sustainable use

The *Carta del rischio* [*Risk Charter*], a government decision support system launched in Italy in the last quarter of the 20th century, can provide some useful insights in focusing on the risk of abandonment. The system was based on the criterion of monitoring the potential conditions impeding the conservation of the built heritage, starting from the distinction between intrinsic conditions and territorial danger (static-structural, environmental and anthropic risk) [<http://www.cartadelrischio.it>]. The *Risk Charter* should have provided a tool, geared towards planned conservation, for complete and wide-ranging knowledge of the built heritage. Instead, this ambitious project was implemented

unevenly over the national territory and then abandoned, giving way to sectoral visions, such as the one focused on seismic vulnerability (Petraroia 2014).

Actually, the clear separation of risk factors on the basis of the distinction between intrinsic and contextual causes or between natural and anthropic factors, may today appear to be a forced or excessive simplification. Abandonment in particular, a risk arising from anthropogenic factors, may be connected to other contextual risk categories: for example, whole settlements being definitively abandoned as a result of natural events (earthquakes, landslides). Furthermore, abandonment can also derive from intrinsic conditions of the built heritage, such as access difficulties, conditions of incompleteness or vulnerable and unreliable building structures.

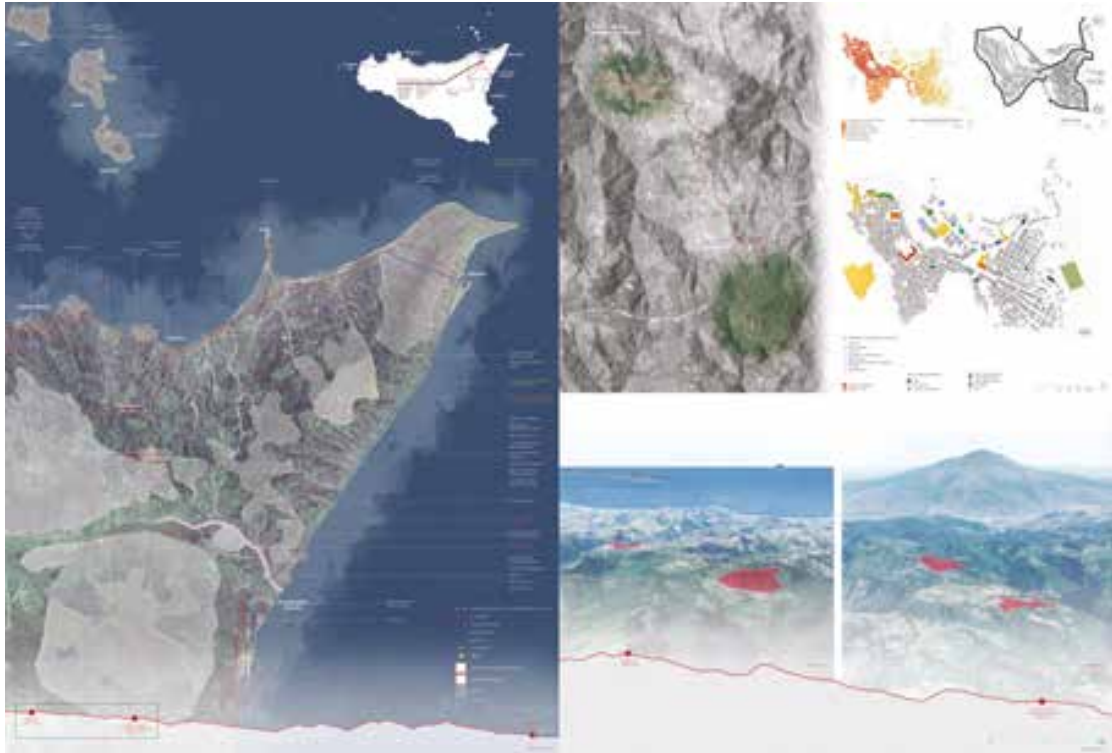
In general, adopting an appropriate long-term vision, the risk of abandonment is similar to the risks in certain types of unsustainable use. In fact, the absence of any kind of activity, and therefore of direct or indirect users in the architectural heritage, renders almost meaningless any testament to the past and amplifies the phenomenon of inattentiveness, which then jeopardizes conservation. On the other hand, *overuse* (too intense and continuous a use) can also be considered a risk factor because it increases wear damage, thus compromising satisfactory utilization. Apart from the quantitative aspects, the unsustainable use of architectural heritage, may present qualitative aspects, in the event of *abuse* (illegal use; improper occupation) or *misuse* (Sulfaro 2018).

The issue regarding the appropriate and sustainable use of the architectural heritage has distant theoretical origins, which have developed in parallel with the importance gradually attributed to interaction with the social sphere. Since the early 20th century, the important role of heritage conservation has been recognized in contemporary use, despite the possible conflict with conservation: one might mention the *use-value* defined by Alois Riegl (1903) and the well-known distinction made between *living* and *dead monuments* (Locke 1904). The *Venice Charter* underlined the correctness of contemporary use, placing decisive limitations on the operational level (ICOMOS 1964, art. 5). Subsequently, contemporary use became an explicit prerequisite for the conservation of the architectural heritage, imposing references to the socio-economic dimension. From a European perspective, in the context of *integrated conservation*, it was specified that «The conservation effort to be made must be measured not only against the cultural value of the buildings but also against their use-value» (CoE 1975).

Again within the European reference framework, where the social value of cultural heritage is particularly felt, the 2005 *Faro Convention* should be remembered (aimed *inter alia* at «emphasise that the conservation of cultural heritage and its sustainable use have human



Fig.1
Territorial
framework of
Montalbano
Elicona (Lo
Giudice 2019).



development and quality of life as their goal») which devotes an entire article to the *Sustainable use of the cultural heritage* (CoE 2005, art. 9). On a global level, the contribution of use in defining the *Cultural Significance* of a place was highlighted in the 2013 *Burra Charter*, which underlines the need for *compatible use*, meaning «a use which respects the cultural significance of a place. Such a use involves no, or minimal, impact on cultural significance» specifying that «Retaining, modifying or reintroducing a significant use may be appropriate and preferred forms of conservation» (ICOMOS 2013, art. 1.11 and 23).

In light of the theoretical developments mentioned here, and of wide-ranging operational experience, awareness is now mature regarding the centrality of the issue of use, in counteracting abandonment or unreliable conservation. This is demonstrated by the fact that the separation between *living* and *dead monuments* has been definitively overcome by *people-centred approaches* to conservation, based on an all-encompassing vision of *Living Heritage* (Wijesuriya 2015:6).

The holistic approach and *Baukultur*

In order to tackle the risk of abandonment of the built heritage, especially when the social component assumes an even more important role, realistic and long-term revitalization

strategies are needed, which look at the entire built environment holistically (taking into account the specific features of the parts with cultural significance within a general framework) and which are based on the principle of including the users (both members of the host communities and visitors).

Two different considerations reinforce this need, bearing in mind the specific conditions of the Mediterranean architectural heritage: the complex intertwining of different types of built environment (in which the parts with cultural value do not have precise physical boundaries when compared to the rest of the built environment); the current trend towards a *people-centred* approach to heritage, which gives the visitor/user a central role in the processes, because of the focus on the objectives of *human development* and *quality of life* (CoE 2005).

The trend towards a holistic approach to architectural heritage must be considered within a broader vision of «integrated urban development as a prerequisite for successful urban sustainability», considered as appropriate to European poly-centralism (EU 2007). Therefore, the concept of *Baukultur* (*culture of construction*), which originated in Germany, was institutionalized, especially in Switzerland; it was shared in 2018 by the European Ministers of Culture in Davos, and may offer significant insights. Despite being a concept rooted in the Central European mentality, *Baukultur* offers a theoretical and operational framework that is globally useful for a holistic approach to the built environment. In fact, the term perfectly summarizes the interrelationships between cultural identity and any human activity that produces consequences on the built environment, in which infrastructure, public space, ordinary buildings and architectural heritage are considered as a single systemic entity, intertwined with the anthropic and natural environment [<https://davosdeclaration2018.ch/>].

The unitary vision of *Baukultur* goes beyond the distinctions between the building process that regards new constructions or existing ones, in the same way as the concept of *building quality*, as defined according to the *performance approach* developed in the last quarter of the 20th century, may already refer to existing performance (downstream of the building process, in the management phase) or to performance objectives/design requirements (upstream of the building process, in the planning and design phase) (UNI 2005).

However, when compared to this approach, to which the orientation towards building quality owes so much, the concept of *Baukultur* also helps to remind us that quality is not a mere technical aspect, limited to the sphere of experts, and that, on the contrary, it is a strategic objective to be traced back to the sphere of users, centred around organizational and cultural aspects (Pacey 1983).



Fig. 3
The town of
Montalbano
Elicona seen
from the south.
Photo Belfiore.
May 2019
(authorization
granted).



The *Davos Declaration* points out that, in order to achieve a *high-quality Baukultur*, shared responsibility is needed, for which the current generation will be called to respond to posterity. There is the need for the continuous and integrated commitment of public institutions and private stakeholders, technicians and economic operators, individuals and communities. The concept of *Baukultur* helps to identify a holistic approach that can be applied operationally, in the analytical, planning and management fields, focusing on the same objectives (safeguarding: tangible and intangible cultural identity; social cohesion; environmental sustainability; inclusive health; and well-being), without neglecting the specificities of the field of application.

Montalbano Elicona as a case study

The theme of the holistic approach to architectural heritage is part of a line of research, explored over the last twenty years at the Department of Architecture of the University of Palermo, based on three fundamental theoretical bedrocks of Architectural Technology: systemic vision, processual dimension and quality orientation. The agreement signed in 2019 with the Municipality of Montalbano Elicona (a town of about 2100 inhabitants that rises up 900 m a.s.l. in the north-eastern part of Sicily; Fig. 1) offered a stimulating opportunity to apply it in practice, adding an important step to the *third-mission* activity (in the Italian university system, understood as the transfer of scientific knowledge to the needs of the territory).

Montalbano Elicona can be considered a case study of general interest, because it has many specific characteristics of the Mediterranean architectural heritage mentioned above. The strategic location with regard to ancient trails, the abundance of water of

excellent quality, the extraordinary beauty of a landscape suspended between the Etna volcano to the south and the Aeolian islands to the north, are the main factors that have dictated the continuity of human permanence in this area since very remote times.

Despite the depopulation (-25% fall in resident population from 2001 to 2019), Montalbano Elicona today can be considered anything but an abandoned village; the human factor and the vitality of the intangible heritage (religious traditions; historical commemorative events; traditional activities in the artisanal, agricultural and gastronomic fields, etc.) greatly nurture the *spirit of the place*, with regard to the connotations mentioned above. In recent years, the municipal administration has made huge efforts to enhance the natural and cultural heritage, involving the local community and counting on its remarkable renown (we might mention the Argimusco plateau, the imposing Swabian-Aragonese castle, the annual *Festa Aragonese*; Figs. 2-4). Among the numerous initiatives, we should recall the victory in the national competition *Borgo dei borghi* in 2015, which was followed by selection as the setting for the annual conference ICOMOS ICHAM *Discover Sicily's Argimusco a holistic approach to heritage management*, which projected Montalbano Elicona on to the international stage [<http://icahm.icomos.org/2018-icahm-annual-meeting-sicily/>].

However, looking at the buildings of the village as a whole, some concern remains regarding the risk of abandonment; this insidious factor is limited to some areas of the town and to the scattered settlements. Especially in the areas less affected by the flows of visitors, advanced ruination is underway in numerous smaller buildings that have not been used for years, mostly residential. Paradoxically, the effects of abandonment appear greater in those building interventions that were carried out during the second half of the 20th century and have distorted the original technological solidity, with the insertion of foreign construction materials, both in the structures and in the finishes. Similar pockets of abandonment and loss of identity in the building structure are symptoms of development that is still uncertain; it requires further efforts to consolidate it, by addressing broader and more lasting objectives than those achievable with single initiatives and by aiming at *sustainable use*, integrating the heritage with contemporaneity (Fig. 5).

On the one hand, the main risks in the lack of an overall picture are uncontrolled *touristification*, with distortion by *gentrification* (Ojeda and Kieffer 2020), and, on the other, the accentuation of economic and demographic imbalances already in place, with an increase in the pockets of abandonment, also including the actual replacement of buildings, without the indispensable, procedural and holistic vision.

Three studies have so far been carried out on Montalbano Elicona, being only apparently disconnected because they are applied to distinct design occasions (oriented to bio-climatic and



Fig. 4
Festa Aragonesa
in the village
of Montalbano
Elicona. Photo
M.L.G. August
2015.



Fig. 5
Montalbano
Elicona. View
of one of the
oldest parts of
the town. Photo
G. De Domenico
September 2015
(authorization
granted).

design for all criteria); they demonstrate the multi-scalar potential of the holistic approach described above in general. The design solutions identified could still be perfected and studied in depth, but the basic approach remains methodologically fixed on the identification of the expressed and implicit needs of three categories of stakeholders: the municipal administration as managing body; the local community and the visitors as users. The first experimentation focused on the need to improve the use of Argimusco, a plateau characterized by monumental rocks featuring zoomorphic and anthropomorphic



forms, whose candidacy as a UNESCO Geopark has been prefigured. Some archaeological evidence from the surrounding area and the archaeo-astronomical interpretation have led to the hypothesis of a sort of natural sanctuary intended for rituals linked to the mountain, Rocca Novara, as equinox indicator (Orlando 2017). Any anthropogenic modification intervention that may be envisaged in the Argimusco area, risks compromising an extraordinary and evocative landscape. Guided by this awareness, the proposal for enhancement included the identification of trails, with different degrees of accessibility, which connect most of the more significant points of the area, and the preferred location for a visitors' center, sized and oriented with reference to a geometric mesh originating from the ruins of a non-too-distant medieval *fondaco* [warehouse] (Fig. 6). The new building, of minimal size and partially-underground, is intended to offer certain essential services, applying passive solutions and using dry construction techniques and renewable energy sources (Fig. 7).

The second experiment focused attention on the urban fabric of the village, developed in successive phases around the Swabian-Aragonese castle, analysing the conditions of accessibility and identifying possible solutions for improving it. In the awareness that total accessibility remains unattainable in steep urban contexts (with an ancient layout), certain homogeneous sectors have been identified (for their altimetric characteristics, urban conformation, building consistency, and user flows). Minimal, widespread interventions (arrangement of simple handrails in strategic points) and two public elevators in the proximity of



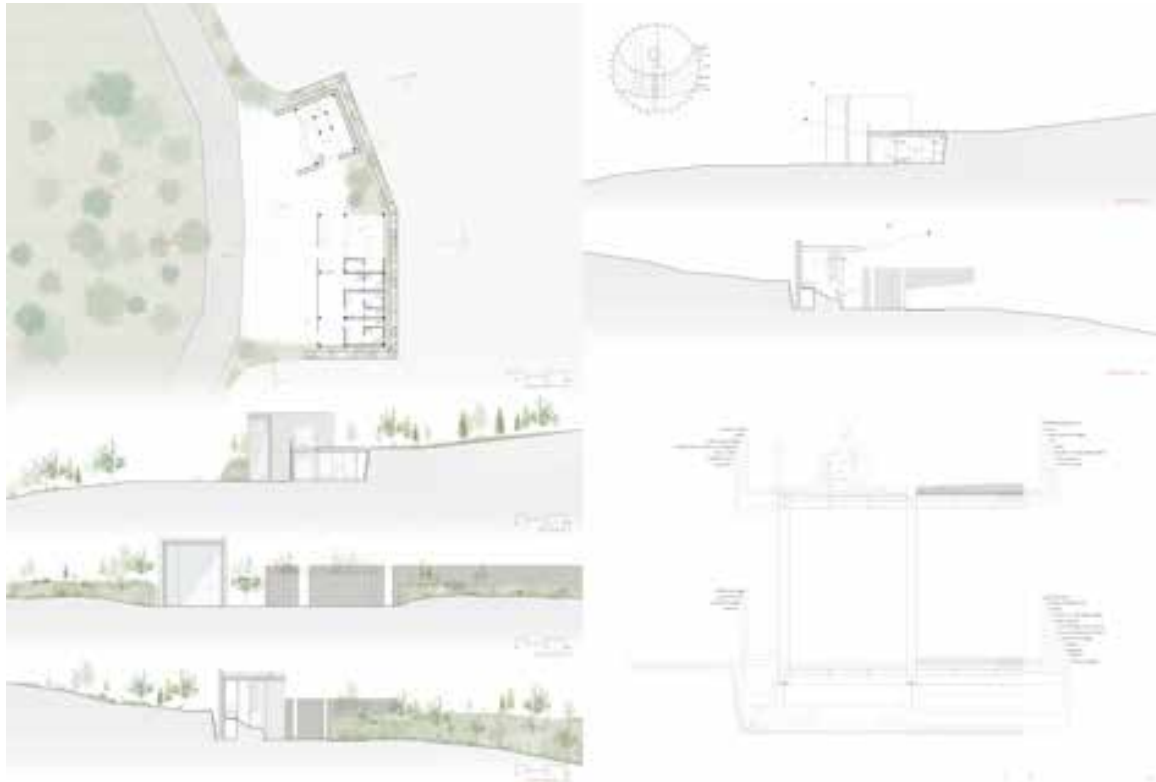
Fig. 6
Design for the Argimusco trails and studies for the location of the visitors' centre (Lo Giudice 2019).

Fig. 7
Visitors' center design for Argimusco (Lo Giudice 2019).



ruined buildings, (integrated with urban furniture solutions) (Figs. 8-9), aim to facilitate mobility around the village for people with walking difficulties ; all this would improve the lives of residents and, in view of the expected general aging of the population, would prove more attractive to visitors.

The third experiment concerns the completion of a building originally intended to house a bus station; only structural elements of reinforced concrete, based on the interesting architectural design from the early 1990s, had been put in place (Fig. 9). The location and the considerable size (which were originally related to urban planning forecasts never carried out) give the unfinished building the potential role of: 1) *call card* for those arriving at the village from the Tyrrhenian coast; 2) urban junction connecting a twentieth-century expansion area and the town hall square, located at different heights; 3) space to accommodate disparate activities, of which the local community feels the need, which could clash with the conservation of ancient buildings due to regulatory problems or distributive and functional conditions. This experimentation was linked to another line of design research devoted to unfinished constructions; it saw the involvement of dozens of students from the degree course in Architecture and is still the subject of in-depth study.



Conclusions

In recent months, the COVID-19 pandemic has cast a shadow of uncertainty that is hindering all medium and long-term forecasts by individuals, families, communities and institutions, imposing on the international community, a search for the *next normal*, and also heavily affecting the cultural sector [<https://en.unesco.org/covid19>]. The disparity of the consequences of the *lockdown* on the various economic and productive activities and the *digital divide* (which has further privileged those who can continue their activities, making use of the benefits of the *Fourth Industrial Revolution*) have rendered pre-existing socio-economic inequalities, discrimination and exclusion ever more evident. At the same time, many have expressed the hope that such an extraordinary contingency could constitute a historic opportunity to concretize the paradigm shift invoked for almost forty years, with the concept of *sustainable development*, starting from a fuller awareness of the consequences of human actions [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1043&v=YtxP7Ya98uk&feature=emb_title&ab_channel=VaticanNews-Italiano].

As for the specific field of cultural heritage, the impact of COVID-19 «remains rather unknown and largely undocumented» and, for this reason, some *Tools for Identifying Risks*,

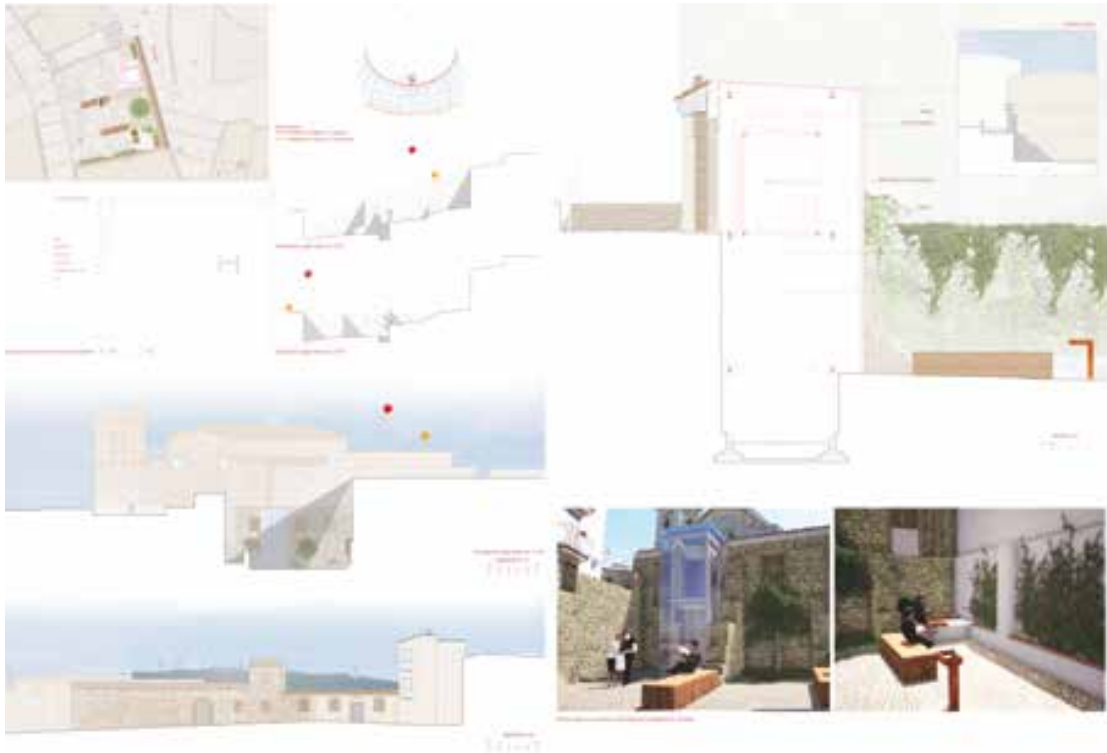


Fig. 8
Studies to improve accessibility to the village of Montalbano Elicona. Wide-ranging interventions (Coppola 2020).

Fig. 9
Studies to improve accessibility to the village of Montalbano Elicona. Design for a public elevator (Coppola 2020)



Fig. 10
The unfinished public building, seen from the top of the Swabian-Aragonese castle of Montalbano Elicona (Photo M.L.G. August 2020).





Monitoring Impacts, Assessing Needs have been developed [<https://www.iccrom.org/heritage-times-covid>]. Focusing our attention on the Mediterranean architectural heritage, the pandemic is threatening the specific characteristics of the area with various interacting effects: the limitation of funds directly devoted to cultural heritage; the diminishing tourist flows that contributed to support local economies in the previous normality; robust and reliable interventions are even more indispensable, aimed at minimizing all forms of risk; prevention or hindrance of integration between tangible and intangible assets.

Despite all this uncertainty, however, we might envisage a rapid evolution of the contemporary scenario, leading to a transformation of the relationships between human beings and the built environment (especially the public, both ordinary and with cultural significance), renewing and integrating the notion of sustainable use. The immediate and direct actions regarding the material aspects (aimed at implementing the necessary distancing to contain the contagion) are already being accompanied by a conceptual renewal of the architectural space, which will provide an opportunity for a methodological and procedural renewal. This renewal will necessarily be gradual and its effects may well be more incisive, owing to the contribution of a holistic approach and unitary strategies.

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Villages et quartiers à risque d'abandon sont aujourd'hui une problématique commune à des nombreuses régions de la Méditerranée, considérée comme un point stratégique dans les nouvelles politiques européennes. L'abandon progressif des zones internes est une constante dans les pays caractérisés par le sous-développement économique, avec les phénomènes d'émigration et de fragmentation du patrimoine culturel. Cela entraîne des problèmes d'architecture et de gestion du territoire. L'objectif principal de ce travail de recherche est de créer un espace de discussion qui comprend l'étude du patrimoine architectural et du paysage ainsi que les témoignages démo-ethno-anthropologiques.