XXV International Conference Living and Walking in Cities - New scenarios for safe mobility in urban areas (LWC 2021), 9-10 September 2021, Brescia, Italy

The second life of small mountain villages: the power of relationship

Maria Rosa Ronzoni[a],*

aDepartment of Engineering and Applied Sciences, University of Bergamo, Viale G.Marconi n.5, Dalmine (Bergamo)24044, Italy

Abstract

I will describe a project concerning the municipality of Castelnovo ne' Monti, where I try to develop spaces for socializing in compliance with the distancing constraints that are required at us. The project strengthens structuring elements of this territory by resorting to various interventions. The strong element is the insertion of a new central place, but equally important is the organization of the small villages, that gravitate around the main nucleus or the enhancement of the three pine forests without forgetting the desire to spread the interest in two authentic treasures: Pietra of Bismantova and Triassic Gypsums of the Secchia valley.

Keywords: Landscape; digitization; small villages; hamlets; environment; relationship; sustainable mobility; shorten distances.

1. Introduction

I am presenting not a research, but a multi-scalar project which, starting from the analysis of a territory, is divided into different design strands that touch on some of the themes covered by the conference program. In fact, solutions have been developed such as the insertion of a public lift to cover an important difference in height or the redefinition of pedestrian and cycle paths that connect small agglomerations and important polarities scattered throughout the territory, that help to educate to active mobility and promote multi-mobility. Solutions have been devised too aimed at creating safe and resilient urban space capable of improving sustainable mobility. I will describe my project concerning the municipality of Castelnovo ne' Monti, in the province of Reggio Emilia. The most important town in the Reggio Apennines, a reference point for mountain villages. The municipality is located at an altitude ranging

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +39-035-205-2319; fax: +39-035-205-2310.
    E-mail address: maria-rosa.ronzoni@unibg.it

between 351 and 1047 meters above sea level, the municipal seat and the central core are located at 700 meters above sea level, has an extension of 96.68 km² and a population of 10,479 inhabitants in 2019. Just in December 2019 I decided to face in the following Academic Year the study of an urban regeneration project for this territory and I began to collect useful material to set up the exercises. I could not imagine what would happen in few months. When my courses at the University resumed in October 2020, I reconsidered the approach to be given to the project, taking as a priority a response to the conditioning imposed by the pandemic, the need to develop spaces for socializing in compliance with the distancing constraints that are required at us, with a warning in mind: "the ways of thinking that generated problems cannot be used to solve them". The situation in which we found ourselves catapulted, in fact, unimaginable in the past years, seems to come out of an Orwell novel. Make choices requires profound reflection, which also affects the spaces of our cities, especially the social spaces, of sharing, so important for our "well-being" and so penalized by the pandemic that has hit us. Today, even more than yesterday, these spaces must be guaranteed but also designed to overcome health emergencies, train to sustainable behaviors and ensure, putting in system the different places, a value of subsidiarity. Starting from the primary urban planning survey, the reading of the territory has brought out some strongly characterizing elements of the places, bearers of values and traditions, but also an expression of the natural environment, places that still today, to those who know how to listen, tell of energies, emotions, dedication, passion for research and fidelity to one's ideals. My thoughts go to Dante, Matilde di Canossa, Lazzaro Spallanzani to name just a few universally known names that have gravitated to these lands. The project has the ambition to help teach how to listen to the voice of places, the storytelling of the events, that led them to be what they are today, to aim to generate interest and stimulate adequate responses from the territory to the needs of our time without that we forget how much it is handed down to us from the past. Both my students of bachelor and master courses were involved. The project then continued in a workshop together with students Giuliana Daniela Foti, Federico Elio Landriani and Lorenzo Monga.

2. Elements marking the territory

Starting from the examination of the place some excellences emerged (Gerhard Curdes, 1993). The project has a duty to enhance these excellences by directing them towards an approach that tends to balance the need for sociality with the need to avoid gatherings. There are two treasures inside the municipal area, two singularities that alone are enough to attract attention: the Pietra di Bismantova and the Triassic Gypsums. They are both geological formations that come from an ancient past. La Pietra, already mentioned by Dante in the fourth canto of Purgatory, is a mountain with a singular shape. Vertical walls delimit a large plateau, an ideal place for climbing, extreme sports and outdoor walks, an exciting and unique landscape.

According to some commentators it would have inspired the Supreme Poet in the description of the Mount of Purgatory. The Triassic Gypsums, few kilometers far from the Pietra, near the course of the Secchia river, represent a treasure trove of emotions, they contain the memory of our past. Triassic Gypsums date back up to 200 million years ago, they let us imagine the great upheavals that have characterized the succession of geological eras; they have captured life in their folds and have preserved it to hand down traces of it crystallized in fossils. Two excellences that, although already well known, the project has a duty to enhance by putting them into a system by promoting initiatives that involve them and paths that make them more usable.

The Covid helps. Places in nature are being rediscovered, large spaces are appreciated, slow movements, on foot or by bicycle, which favor proximity gazes, all this one is gaining attention and educate to pay attention to our surroundings. Among other things, due to their characteristics, open places also interpret very well the distancing needs that the current situation requires. Another strong element of this context is the myriad of small villages, as many as 59 hamlets (Fig.1), scattered throughout the municipal area, in relation to each other and to the main context (Baricchi W., 1988).

It is necessary to put them into a system, to enhance them, ideal entities to revive the territory in compliance with the new rules made necessary by the pandemic, taking advantage of new technologies that make it possible to shorten distances. It is necessary to highlight that there are few abandoned houses even in the hamlets farthest from the center, although in many cases they are inhabited only for limited periods of the year. Since 2020, the mountains have been perceived as a safer place than the city and, when possible, those who work remotely have preferred to relocate to surroundings in contact with nature.
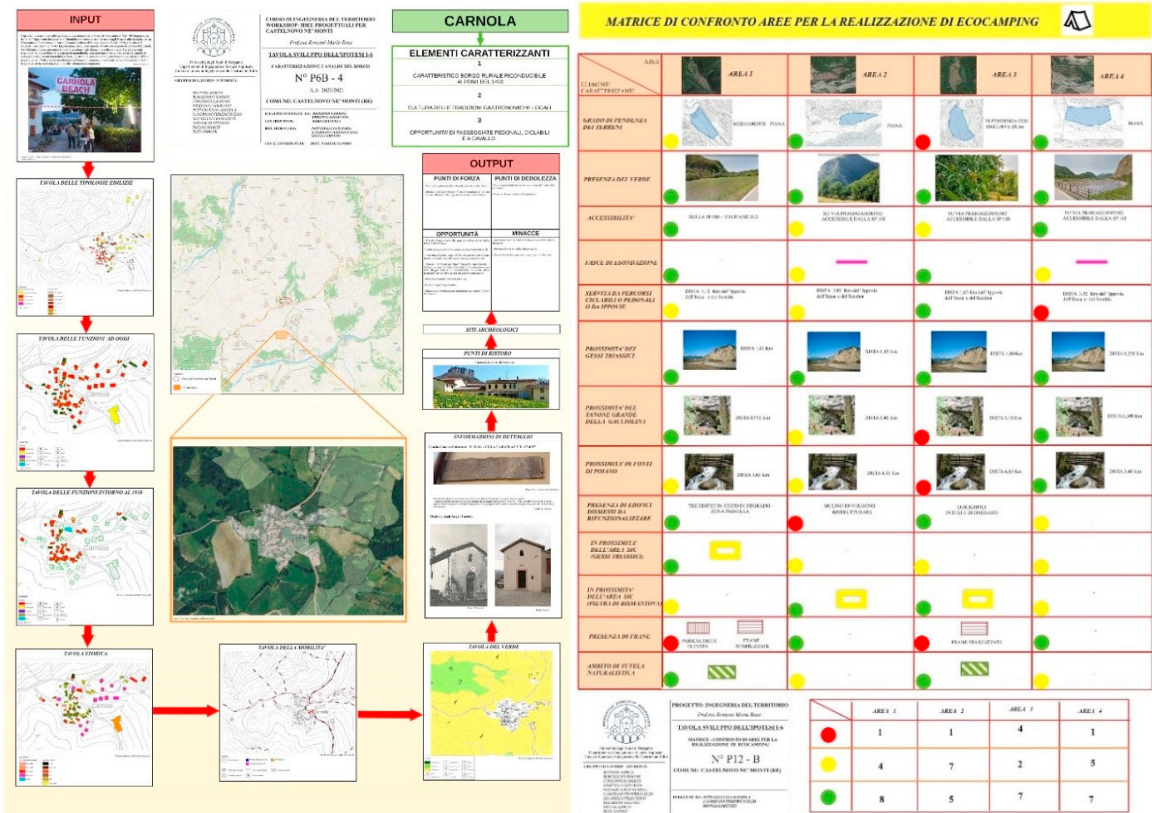
Fig. 1. A descriptive sheet has been prepared for each small village, in the example the village of Carnola and a comparison matrix to guide the choice of the area where to place an eco-camping; Maria Rosa Ronzoni together with students Giuliana Daniela Foti, Federico Elio Landriani, Lorenzo Monga

Statistics referring to last summer revealed a demand higher than supply for houses in the hills / mountains. Another singularity, albeit of an order of magnitude lower than the previous ones, is the existence within the central inhabited nucleus of three pine forests. In the mountains the presence of a pine forest in urban centers is frequent, but here there are even three with very different characteristics: one, Monte Bagnolo, public, organized as a park, in practice the pine forest of the city; the second, Monte Forco, entirely private, closed to the public; the third, Monte Castello, also private, but the custodian of the collective memory: on its top there is a trace, in the fragment of a tower, of the castle that gave the place its name.

For these three elements of enrichment of the offer in environmental, cultural and landscape terms, a design idea was developed that tries to meet the needs expressed by the emergency's situation we are experiencing. Then there is the main nucleus, with significant differences in height that make walking tiring, essentially configuring two linearities: that of Via Roma, central at a higher level and that of Via Bagnoli, at a lower, more external level, matrix of a consolidated suburb, which however fails to express a specific characterization, it is not marked by recognizable collective places. Essentially an unstructured mesh that struggles to generate spaces for relationships. The center is elsewhere, it is at the top. The project points out to give life to a new centrality in the aim of giving continuity to these two parts of the town, Via Roma and Via Bagnoli, putting them in communication with a vertical connective.

3. Projects

The ideas developed concern different sites of the municipal area; they arise from the observation of this territory (Christa Reicher, 2017) and they are a direct consequence of what the analysis of the data collected has made evident

in terms of potential, needs, problems and external conditioning (Vincenzo Columbo, 1982). which the old building of the consortium stands, which is expected to be demolished shortly. Our work starts from this site. Really, the much more complex project went to study the territory of Castelnovo ne' Monti as a whole, so that is possible making it works as a system, bringing into play the small villages that surround it (Fig.2), which over time have partially lost their functions and which today can constitute an important resource for reactivating relationship systems and enhancing the identity value of places, highlighting their individual characterizations.
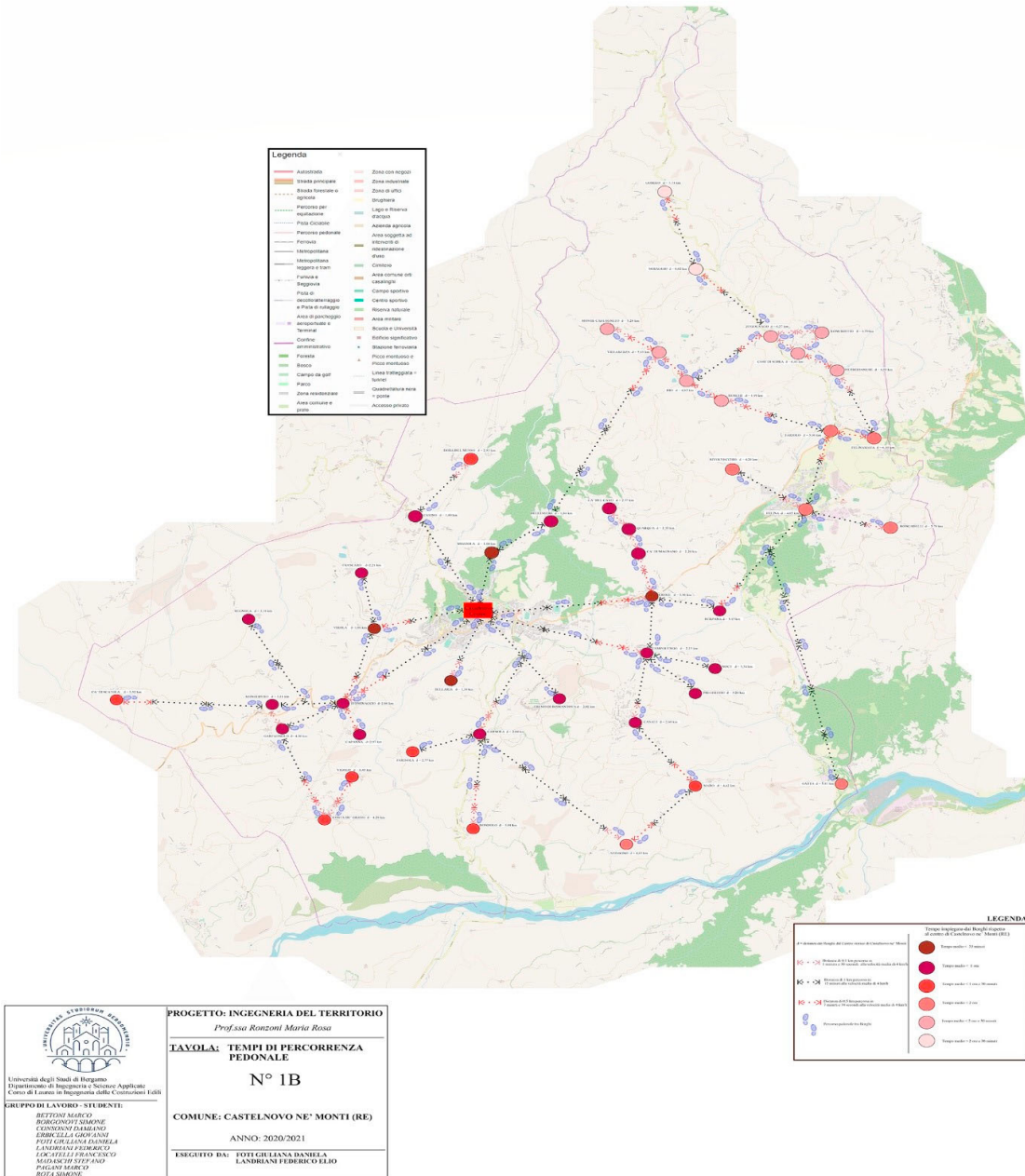
Fig. 2 Travel times for walkers both between villages and between these and the main centre; Source: Maria Rosa Ronzoni together with students Giuliana Daniela Foti, Federico Elio Landriani, Lorenzo Monga

As for the square, this takes shape on the site currently occupied by an old half-ruined building and opens onto the magnificent panorama offered by the Apennine chain. Everything hinges on this strong relationship between the place, the square and its context: the "Pietra" and the succession of the surrounding peaks. The empty space left by the demolition of the building needs to be filled, to find an element that helps to read the relationships that can be activated, that guides people to move in space and orients the visitor's gaze. For this reason, a wall has been proposed that follows the footprint of the pre-existing building in its north-west oriented front and with its openings that frame the surrounding mountains captures the gaze of passers-by and directs it towards the landscape that opens all around. (Fig.3a, Fig.3b) The space originated from the wall, almost a belvedere, is articulated as a multifunctional, flexible place, in which various activities find space: from the open-air cinema in the summer months to the skating rink in the winter, from the weekly market to the game of children, from the space for meetings and public debates to a place for recreation and observation (Fig.4). A series of digital screens, distributed on the square and designed in the villages too, help to enhance the strength of relationships in order to transmit information and images by bringing the events of the square into the villages and the events in the villages within the square. A sort of swinging game between the magic of the past and the frenzy of the future and an answer to the pandemic situation that requires the fragmentation of spaces to avoid gathering.

As far as the central core is concerned, the project strengthens its structuring elements by resorting to various interventions. The strong element is the insertion of a new central area in a place currently used as a parking lot, on
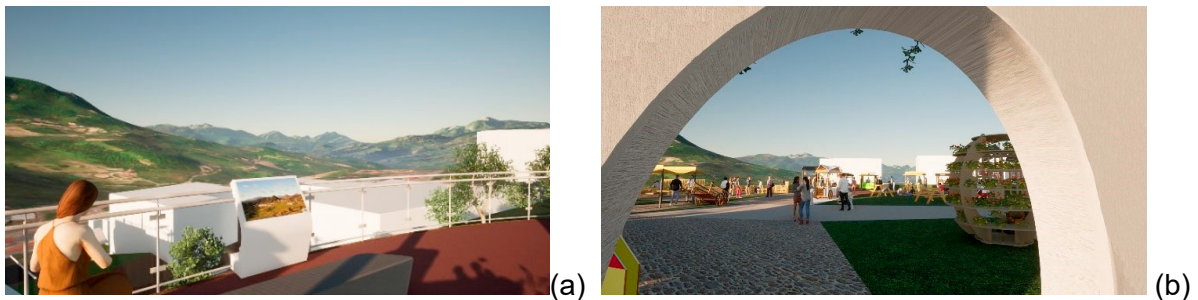

(a)　　　(b)

Fig.3 (a) The Belvedere view embracing the Appennine chain; (b) The secret square revealed by the openings on the wall; Maria Rosa Ronzoni together with students Giuliana Daniela Foti, Federico Elio Landriani, Lorenzo Monga

The project builds physical relationships with the surrounding landscape, but it draws strength from the virtual relationships that the screens distributed in the square and in the villages activate. This project could find an obstacle in the fact that the arrangement of the area takes away parking spaces from the parking lot. Currently, in fact, the space is used as a place to store cars. Rethinking it as a public space capable of attracting and offering multiple points of interest to those who experience it does not go well with the construction of a parking lot. In order not to disappoint the expectations that citizens have expressed and, at the same time, remain faithful to the idea of quality space, it was decided to create a car park near this new multipurpose place. Around the area, overlooking the underlying Via Bagnoli, there is a long-abandoned building, which in the past housed a nightclub.

The proposal envisages demolishing this existing volume, now degraded, and replacing it with that of a multistorey structure, that rises up until the height of the square above, thus assuming more roles: for sure that of parking, with a number of parking spaces greater than that previously offered in the parking area. However, some levels can also be designed to accommodate different functions; we have imagined a talent garden, but it could also be others such as a kindergarten, a nursery, or simply offices or clinics. These are just ideas, aimed at emphasizing the great flexibility of use of this structure. However, it should be emphasized how a talent garden could be an incentive for young local professionals to take root in the territory by bringing ideas, life, knowledge, energy, comparison.

The project assigns another important task to this structure: that of guaranteeing, through the vertical connection elements present, a direct connection between Via Bagnoli and the central Via Roma, where the most significant polarities are present. A way to bring the center closer, to ensure quick and direct connections between parts otherwise disconnected from each other. It would also have the advantage of reducing / eliminating the crossing and tourist

traffic on Via Roma, freeing the heart of the town from cars to convey them to the peripheral axis of Via Bagnoli and there block them, allowing you to approach on foot, safely and quickly to the main centralities.

A solution that with little effort brings places closer together, reduces distances and lowers the urban planning load attributable to traffic in the town center. This choice can also be configured as an opportunity to amplify the space of the new square in further place where the events proposed in the area can bounce, while still guaranteeing meeting points in the open air capable of ensuring the multiplication of connections in safety. All together separately! The village project has already been mentioned when I told you about the square. The most significant aspects that emerged from the reading of these small villages concerned the fact that, even today, they are mostly inhabited; that most are characterized by the presence of small oratories, testimony in the past of a cohesive and rooted community, currently closed and deprived of their role. Hamlets that currently assume the residential function as prevalent, while the historical investigation, at least for the most important hamlets, in addition to the oratory has highlighted the presence of a small school and, at least, a small store. The liveliness of the past is striking compared to the current monotony.

Fig.4 Rendering of the new public area, in the first phase of the design has also collaborated student Madaschi Stefano

We must be able to break this pattern, without redoing the past, but taking advantage of the opportunities of teleworking, of niche productions, of the possibility of online commerce without forgetting to associate this offer with that of zero-kilometer markets aimed at populations locals. We could start again from the oratories, reopening them to the community, digitally connecting them with each other and with other public places in the municipality to make activities and gatherings shared in compliance with the distancing that is suggested to us. This project finds comfort and stimulus in various calls and initiatives, both regional and national. As regards the digitization of the territory, the reference is to the document of July 2020 "The mountain in the network. Agenda for the connectivity of the Italian mountains that aims to overcome the digital divide" by ENICEM (National Body of Municipalities and Mountain Communities). But also in several calls, particularly one of the Emilia-Romagna Region that allocates non-repayable resources for the purchase of a house in the mountains as one undertakes to restore it and move one's residence there. The call was a successful and the funding ran out. In other cases, houses for restoration were offered for 1 euro.

In terms of response, there are numerous initiatives by young people who leave the cities for the mountains or, more generally, the countryside where they can start activities that allow them a more direct contact with nature. They range from the examples of young Ligurians who in the Cinque Terre, in this period of pandemic, have resumed cultivating terraces and are restoring the paths, to the young man from Novara who left a successful job in the city to start a blacksmith business, to a young yoga teacher who settled in a small town in Umbria to open his yoga school, but also to devote himself to the cultivation of old vineyards, to the example of young people who have also started

cultivating bio agricultural products on the Parma Apennines to finish with the example of Tobia, an Emilian architect who has started a successful sheep farming business in a place near Castelnovo ne' Monti.

Starting from these examples, with reference to the information collected during the inspections regarding the crops, manufacturing and typical products of the places, it could be possible to encourage the inclusion of new activities within the hamlets. A strong element of this territory is certainly placed in the typical food products, in which Parmigiano Reggiano is the master, here the culture of food could be one of the themes to be declined in these villages (Fig.5).
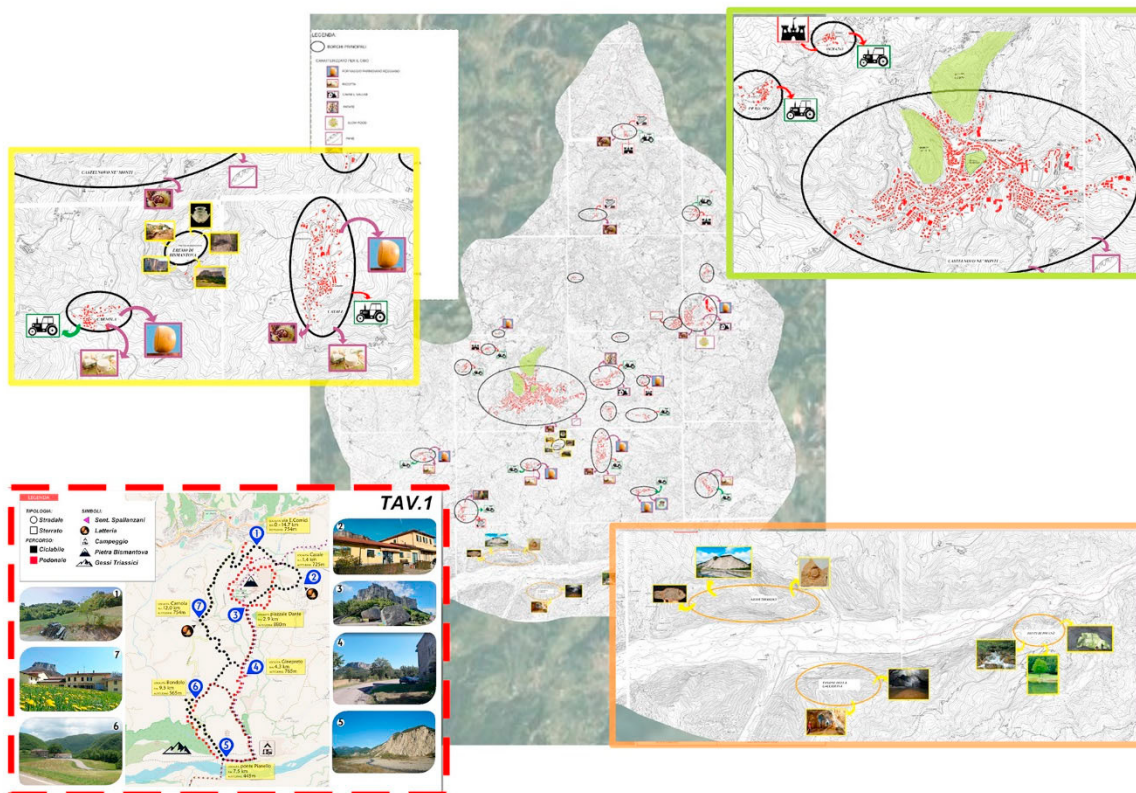

Fig.5: Maps show some of the design ideas developed in the project: the small villages and the Pietra, with the elements that characterize them, the main center with the three pine forests, the cycle path and the pedestrian, ring route, which connects the Pietra with the Triassic Gypsums, the Gypsums area, rich of environmental emergencies; Maria Rosa Ronzoni together with students Giuliana Daniela Foti, Federico Elio Landriani, Lorenzo Monga. Only for TAV 1, at the bottom left, have also collaborated students Bettoni Marco, Consonni Damiano, Pagani Marco

A recent publication of the Tuscan-Emilian Apennine National Park also reminds us of this. (Ballarini G., 2020) It should not be forgotten that in recent years a very interesting event aimed at spreading the culture of food, typical and genuine products have started from the territory of Castelnovo né Monti: Felina Slow Food, an event promoted by the historic non-profit association led by Carlo Petrini. But there are many ideas that can take shape. In the local tradition there are some activities that could be proposed again, others that could be introduced from scratch, also leaving room for the proposals carried out by young entrepreneurs.

The presence of sawmills in the area in the past suggests, for instance, reactivating this activity and training dedicated staff. The existence of a luthier among the inhabitants evokes the possibility of launching training courses dedicated to this profession. In the past the chestnut supply chain has characterized these areas, the memory of those times is preserved in the numerous mills and in the "metati" scattered among the mountains, the former were used to grind the chestnuts to obtain flour, the latter to dry the fruit producing dry chestnuts, good for winter dishes.

Today these poor food products have become niche food, there is demand on it and these cultivations could be of interest to some young people inclined to live in contact with nature. At the bottom, not many kilometers from Castelnovo ne' Monti, on the other side of the Apennines, in Apella there is a farm started with passion and success by a young lady, an engineer who gave up a secure job as a manager to run a business that brings back to the table own organic products typical of the local tradition. As for the Triassic Gypsums and the Pietra of Bismantova, they are the subject of numerous projects and initiatives. We limit ourselves to connecting these two important sites with a ring-shaped cycle and pedestrian path (Fig.5), created by connecting sections of pre-existing paths and making it a system with other important paths that skirt these places. I am thinking to the path denominated Lazzaro Spallanzani or to the Matildico path, recently restored and proposed to the public, but also to a horse trail that crosses these territories.

This is because the two places are well known, have a loyal public and attract many visitors, but, surprisingly, those who are outside a certain circle or are not reached by the communication of the Tuscan-Emilian Apennine Park is not aware of these excellences, therefore I believe it is right to make every effort to give them greater visibility. We found the lack of a place capable of welcoming tourists and sportsmen for the night, we would like to offer them the opportunity for a direct and prolonged contact with this unique natural environment. In our opinion, the offer of a non-traditional campsite, not too equipped, very spartan, but with innovative elements such as wi-fi connection and solar tents, closed to campers, but open to ridge tents, located inside the valley of Secchia river, at the foot of the Triassic gypsums is exactly what this place lacks to guarantee a stay in absolute harmony (Fig.1) and this we have proposed. We also thought of the three pine forests: Monte Bagnolo, the public pine forest, is already equipped, the idea is to enhance its services to make it more attractive. For the privately owned pine forest of Monte Castello, there is already a recovery project of the ancient tower on the top, in adjoint we suggest fit out the interior as a digital museum where you can find the history of Castelnovo ne' Monti, of its illustrious visitors, of the events that have marked its time, its traditions. For the pine forest of Monte Forco, which is also privately owned, we instead went so far as to suggest to the owners that they entrust the management of the area to a start-up that would enhance its natural environment by organizing sensory paths, proposing it as a clinic in the green for "green therapy" or setting up temporary exhibitions, for example with green sculptures.

4. Conclusions

Projects, rather than words, are told through drawings, which is why I have attached some of them to this contribution, I hope they are effective in communicating the meaning of what it is suggested to do. At the present time the municipal administration appreciates the project and is looking for resources to carry it out. It will be interesting to verify in retrospect how much a spatial organization such as the one proposed affects the modal distributions of displacements. The project, starting from a careful reading of the place, highlights the salient parts, enhances by trying to put them into a system, giving them greater visibility, laying the roots in the memory and history of the places and intervenes to revitalize them by drawing liberally on the technology, the immaterial and what the current pandemic is teaching us.

References

Ballarini, G., et al., 2020. Tesori d'Appennino, i frutti della terra e del lavoro nella Riserva MaB tra Emilia e Toscana, Edizioni DIABASIS, Parma. pp. 121.

Baricchi, W., 1988. Insediamento storico e beni culturali Appennino reggiano, Tecnostampa, Reggio Emilia.

Columbo V., 1982. La ricerca urbanistica, Indagini primarie, Giuffré Editore, Milano

Curdes G.,1997. Stadtstruktur und Stadtgestaltung, Kohlhammer Verlag, Berlin

Reicher C, 2017. Städtebauliches Entwerfen, Springer Fachmedien, Wiesbaden

Società dei territorialisti/e, 2019. Manifesto di Camaldoli per una nuova centralità della montagna. Camaldoli.