



Recovery of rural centres and “albergo diffuso”: A case study in Sardinia, Italy



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ABSTRACT

The “albergo diffuso” (scattered hotel) is a typical Italian tourism system, introduced for the first time in the early 1980s by the Autonomous Region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia. It is a tourist accommodation management system that is able to deliver the services of a full hotel, by lodging clients in accommodation created in and around existing houses in mostly rural contexts. The accommodation is within walking distance of a centrally located main building. The albergo diffuso is organised horizontally, while traditional hotels are usually organised vertically, with a principal, and often single, building hosting common spaces and rooms. This new kind of hospitality offers visitors the opportunity of “living in the area”, by taking part in the social life of the village, and may be seen as a tool for preventing the depopulation of small rural towns and for recovering abandoned villages. In this paper we discuss a proposal for an albergo diffuso in Osini, in Sardinia, Italy. Osini is an old rural village that was abandoned in 1951 because of a severe landslide. We verify the premises and viability of this intervention in terms of the opportunity it offers for launching rural tourist activities in the area, the European and national legal and institutional scenario, the regional landscape and hydro geological planning tools, and the recommendations for adopting coherent building types, techniques, and materials.

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Introduction

Rural tourism, i.e., the development of tourist activities in rural settings, has been acknowledged to be an important strategy for combating the depopulation of small rural undeveloped settlements. In Europe, tourism generates new job opportunities and is the third largest socio-economic activity (European Commission, 2010). Rural tourism is gaining importance in Europe. According to the OECD (2009), the Albergo Diffuso (AD) is a remarkable example of such a kind of activity (Battaglia and Battino, 2009; Confalonieri, 2011; Panicia, 2012; Quattrociochi and Montella, 2013).

The AD, literally “scattered hotel” (Droli, 2013), has been defined using a number of different names, such as “diffused hotel” (Russo et al., 2013), and “distributed hospitality” (Mandelli and La Rocca, 2006). In this paper we use the term “albergo diffuso”, which was proposed for the first time by Dall'Ara (2010). AD is a typical Italian phenomenon (Confalonieri, 2011). However in recent years similar cases have also been documented in Spain. The AD developed in the north-eastern Italian region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia in the early

1980s, when it was experimented with for the first time as a way of recovering and rehabilitating historic buildings which had been rendered uninhabitable by a severe earthquake. This kind of accommodation involves recovering formerly abandoned rural buildings, and so it does not require further land to be consumed for new residential buildings. This minimises the environmental impact on rural areas.

Many works (see, inter alia, Cano et al., 2013, and Cascone and Porto, 2008) expand on the concept that tourism is a major economic driving force for the recovery and reuse of rural buildings, and leads to important landscape changes. The design of tourist accommodation should follow traditional building methods and use the original types of houses and materials. In this way, rural development is based on sustainable principles, as it uses existing housing, re-employs often abandoned techniques and materials, and creates new landscapes that are still meaningful in terms of the sense of local identity and attractive for potential tourists. In this respect, many successful recovery projects are based on careful designs, which start from historical analysis of the original shapes and production processes (see inter alia Torreggiani and Tassinari, 2012).

In this paper we aim to present a proposal for an AD to recover the historical centre of Osini in Sardinia, Italy. This rural town was damaged by a severe landslide in 1951 and completely abandoned.

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Table 1
Research questions investigated in this paper.

Code	Description
RQ ₁	Can tourism be a catalyst of economic development and recovery?
RQ ₂	What are the main forms of rural tourism?
RQ ₃	Which are the bodies and laws regulating AD in Europe?
RQ ₄	Which prescriptions are contained in the laws regulating AD and Italy at the regional level?
RQ ₅	Which are the regional planning premises of the Osini AD proposal?
RQ ₆	How is the Osini AD proposal characterised?

Recently, a reclassification of the hydro geological risk level has opened up the possibility of reoccupying Osini. AD may be a useful way of attracting tourists and potential residents. To be more precise, in our paper we address the following Research Questions (RQ_s) (see Table 1). Research question one (RQ₁) is on the general institutional context of tourism. RQ₂ concerns the development of rural forms of tourism, including the AD. RQ₃ and RQ₄ concern the legal framework which regulates AD projects and their management in Europe and Italy. And, finally, RQ₅ and RQ₆ concern the regional planning premises and the layout, housing types, and materials used in the AD proposal for Osini.

The argument develops as follows. In Section 2, we present an overview of tourism in Europe. In Section 3 we present a state of the art summary on recovery projects and the reuse of rural buildings for tourism and also comment on research works about AD. In Section 4 we examine the European and Italian bodies and regulations which cover rural tourism. In Section 5 we present an AD proposal for Osini. In Section 6 we discuss the results of the research questions and in Section 7 we summarise the conclusions of the whole argument discussed in this paper.

Overview on tourism in Europe

In this section, we elaborate on tourism development focusing on its European and Italian aspects and figures. We stress contextual elements that are relevant as they may act as pre-conditions of local tourism-based projects, including our AD proposal for the historical centre of Osini.

Tourism is a major sector of the European economy.

The Lisbon Treaty acknowledged the relevance of tourism and pointed out that the European Union has the responsibility to carry out actions which will support, coordinate or supplement the actions of the Member States in the tourism sector, through “encouraging the creation of a favourable environment for the development of undertakings in this sector promoting cooperation between the Member States, particularly by the exchange of good practice” (European Union, 2012).

The European Union is one of the most important tourist destinations. In 2010 the European Commission stressed that tourism is relevant for a variety of reasons. It is an important economic activity and an instrument for reinforcing Europe’s image internationally. Thus the EC aims to “encourage a coordinated approach for initiatives linked to tourism and define a new framework for action to increase its competitiveness and its capacity for sustainable growth” (European Commission, 2010). With respect to sustainable growth, the EC strongly emphasises the importance of offering high quality sustainable tourism at the international and European level (European Commission, 2010; Commission of the European Communities, 2006, 2007; WTO, 2007; UNEP and WTO, 2005).

Finally, according to the Eurostat yearbook issued in 2013, “tourism can play a significant role in the development of European regions given that infrastructure created for tourism purposes contributes to local development [...]” (European Union, 2013) and

it can be an important activity with cultural, environmental, and social implications, given that it involves both small and medium-sized enterprises. In Europe’s island states and regions tourism (accommodation, transport and recreational facilities) is “one of the main sources of income for the local population” (European Union, 2013).

According to the European Commission (2010), the European tourism industry (i) generates over 5% of EU GDP, (ii) is the third largest socio-economic activity, and (iii) creates about 9.7 million jobs, with a significant proportion of young people among those employed. In addition recent statistics have highlighted that 2.3 million people in the EU are employed in the tourist accommodation sector (European Union, 2010). In 2011, there were more than 200,000 hotels and 25,000 campsites in the EU, for a total number of over 20 million beds (European Union, 2013). Fig. 1 provides an overview of the density of accommodation in the EU (number of beds in hotels relative to the land area) in 2011.

Italy is one of the top five international tourist destinations in the world (European Union, 2013) and recent studies have shown that the Italian tourist reception system is mainly used by foreign customers who, in 2012, generated 32 billion Euros of income, or, in other words, 2% of Italy’s GDP and 39.2% of exports of services (ONT, 2013). Moreover in Italy, despite the economic crisis of recent years, the number of companies operating in the tourism sector continues to grow.

The regions of southern Italy and the islands exert certain attractiveness for long holidays, especially in summer: Apulia, Calabria, Campania, Sardinia, and Sicily are favourite destinations for this type of holidays (ISTAT, 2013). According to Smith (2003), “Sardinia has quite a rugged landscape; hence its tourism industry tends to be based on rural tourism as well as on the more established coastal tourism”. Recent studies report for 2013 an increase in tourist arrivals in Sardinia mainly due to a higher number of international arrivals (CRENoS, 2014). In addition, the average daily expenditure is equal to 61 Euros for Italian and to 94 Euros for foreign tourists, while tourism has generated a total expenditure of about 2 billion Euros, corresponding to 8.2% of the regional added value (CRENoS, 2014).

Recovery of rural settlements and Albergo Diffuso: a state of the art summary

In this section, we provide the reader with a panorama of studies concerning the tourism-led reuse and conversion of ancient rural buildings and settlements, local building types and materials, and the AD. A discussion of these issues is of paramount importance, as they inspire our proposal of AD-based recovery project in the rural centre of Osini showing the potential to become a tourist destination.

Contemporary landscapes are characterised by a system of scattered rural buildings and small or second level settlements. Recent developments introduced by the European Landscape Convention have re-awakened the interest of scholars and concerned parties in the recovery of and giving added value to those rural landscapes (De Montis, 2014). We live an historical period where rural landscapes and activities are being abandoned and converted to other socio-economic activities, usually connected to the provision of services. In this respect, we believe that the recovery and reuse of rural buildings is a prominent research field, and has been so since the pioneering contributions of Ascárd (1996), Birkkjær and Pedersen (1996), and De Montis (1996). We stress here the importance of many studies concerning the need to base the recovery and reuse of rural buildings and settlements on the coherence with historical layouts, local landscapes, and social identity. According to van der Vaart (2005), the reuse of redundant farm buildings as

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