

## Reversing cultural marginality in inner peripheries: the key role of community mapping

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### Abstract

The marginality of inner peripheries – related to the chronic depopulation and abandonment – fosters the sense of subalternity of communities living in these areas. Nevertheless, inner peripheries' heritage still has an important transformative potential, acting both as a resource and as a catalyst for change and community empowerment. According to the Faro Convention, heritage goes beyond physical artefacts to encompass values, practices and meanings that define collective identities and can serve here as a powerful counter-narrative. This paper explores potential and limitations of community mapping in strengthening relations between heritage and community and discusses the first outcomes of a participatory process developed in a small town of the Tammaro-Titerno area (South Italy). The process highlights the deep historical stratification and the interplay between human practices and physical environment that contributed to shape the territorial heritage.

### Introduction

Across Europe, inner peripheries (ESPON, 2017) are increasingly struggling with marginalization shaped by spatial, socio-economic, political, and symbolic dynamics (Schmidt, 1998; Kühn, 2015; Rodriguez-Pose, 2018). From a cultural perspective, marginalization manifests itself as geographical isolation, characterized by limited access to cultural centers and infrastructure, such as museums, theatres, and universities. This isolation reinforces perceptions of exclusion, while socio-economic trends, such as the emigration of young people, further deprive these areas of innovation and creativity. Moreover, the disconnection between local and global cultural networks, the limited influence on policy-making processes and persisting global urban-centered development models further exacerbate the sense of subalternity of communities living in inner peripheries. As a result, marginal territories are perceived as “places of elsewhere” (Membretti et al., 2022), distant from the values and dynamics of cultural production. This symbolic marginalization fosters a negative self-image within communities, reinforcing narratives of cultural subalternity and isolation. On the other hand, the main risk is that policies aimed at enhancing these territories are based on a romanticized imaginary of rural life in subordination to urban lifestyles, on the ‘musealization’ of historical centers and on the occasional leisure-time use (Coppola, 2023).

Despite these challenges, cultural heritage offers significant transformative potential for inner peripheries, acting both as a resource and as a catalyst for change and community empowerment (Duxbury, 2020).

According to the Faro Convention (CoE, 2005), heritage goes beyond physical artefacts to encompass values, practices and meanings that define collective identities, and it is intrinsically linked to community recognition. The latter is crucial for preserving and activating heritage as a resource.

This perspective is particularly relevant in inner peripheries, where cultural subalternity often arises from a lack of both internal and external recognition (Schmidt, 1998). Heritage can serve here as a powerful counter-narrative. Bottom-up approaches to the enhancement of cultural heritage can reverse the perceptions of marginality, fostering new visions and opportunities for local development.

Active relationships between a community and its environment are the basis for sustainable living (Magnaghi, 2010), envisioning trajectories of place-based enhancement (Barca et al., 2012). Many scholars (Wilson and Sanyal, 2013; Carrosio et al., 2018; Pappalardo and Sajia, 2020) recognize the active involvement of communities as an effective way for activating revitalization strategies to counterbalance the progressive abandonment of places

and their legacy. Reconnecting communities with their territories starts with awareness of local heritage. The Faro Convention (CoE, 2005) defines two fundamental concepts: cultural heritage and heritage community. Since the heritage community “consists of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish [...] to sustain and transmit to future generations” (CoE, 2005, art.2 b), heritage goes beyond the institutional status attributed to the relevant places and extends to any place to which a community attributes a collective value. Cultural heritage is what people identify as “a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions. It includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time” (CoE, 2005, art.2 a).

In the context of inner peripheries, even more than in cities, both human-place relationships and the traces of the practices that have shaped them over time remain recognizable (Magnaghi, 2010; Ferraresi, 2012), (Magnaghi, 2010; Ferraresi, 2012), despite the risk of losing both heritage and its collective memory.

This contribution explores an ongoing process of community mapping a trigger for reviving the relationships between community and its local heritage and contributing to outline new trajectories for a place-based strategy beyond urban-centric models.

### **Losing the heritage of rural areas in Italy: the inner areas between abandonment and musealization**

In Italy the term “Inner areas” was firstly introduced by the National Strategy for Inner Areas (Barca et al. 2014), and referred to the municipalities located significantly far from the supply centers of essential facilities (education, health, and mobility). According to the inner areas’ classification updated in 2020<sup>1</sup>, about half of the Italian municipalities can be classified as inner areas, hosting less than a quarter of the national population. These mostly hilly and mountainous villages face several interconnected problems resulting from long-term migration to cities: decreasing and aging of population, lack of accessibility, economic marginality, lack of job opportunities and higher education, physical abandonment of the architectural and infrastructural heritage, political and cultural marginality. Depopulation dynamics result in the loss of both tangible and intangible heritage. Indeed, heritage is what people identify as expression of their values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions. Therefore, such dynamics, altering or even breaking the relationships between people and places, often result into a loss of local culture, traditions, practices as well as changes in how inhabitants relate to the territory.

Moreover, inner and peripheral areas play a crucial role in ensuring the provision of ecosystem services at the territorial and regional scale (Borghi, 2017; Galderisi and Limongi, 2024). These territories own the major reserve of natural resources, biodiversity, and agricultural areas; hence, they play a role of paramount importance in regulating ecological balances and providing services for the entire population, including urban centers. However, the long-term provision of ecosystem services cannot be ensured by a relationship of mere and passive dependence for the multiple benefits they provide. An active and sustainable relationship between local communities and their territorial heritage entails shared responsibility and care. According to Magnaghi (2020), while ecosystem services are grounded in the objective value of nature for humans, eco-territorial services are grounded in the subjective and cultural value of territorial heritage. They depend on the mutual relationship between people and places and are essential for activating sustainable and place-based practices. Eco-territorial services go beyond the logic of extraction and foster a regenerative and place-based approach to territorial development. This applies for all the components of the territorial heritage (nature, architecture, culture, practices, etc.)

As a result, reversing the chronic processes of depopulation and abandonment requires reviving the relationships that have shaped territorial heritage over the years.

### **Reviving the relationship between community and local heritage to outline place-based and shared strategies.**

The path towards a new place-based development strategy goes through a process of effective and sustained community engagement (Buuren, 2009; Cook and Nation, 2016). Communities must be largely involved in both the exploration of local potential and the design of actions to take. The starting point is establishing a dialogue with key local stakeholders (institutions, associations, active citizens, etc.): researchers must forge relationships with both the place and the community, develop a critical analysis of the internal dynamics that have eroded traditional ways of living, while identifying latent resources and values that could inspire new development trajectories.

The participatory process is structured around two main phases: co-exploration and co-design. The co-exploration phase is devoted to the collective construction of territorial knowledge based on the recognition by the community of its own values and resources, trying to identify links and potentials. Researchers act as mediators guiding the exploration of local histories, memories, and landscapes. Their role is to connect the existing cultural, social, and ecological values of the territory with emerging opportunities, helping communities rediscover the meanings embedded in their everyday spaces. Community mapping is especially valuable in this phase: it helps visualizing local assets – natural, historical, and cultural – and allows linking places with intangible heritage – memories, rituals, etc. This is particularly relevant to foster a renewed sense of shared responsibility for places. Community maps are not only descriptive tools but also political paths to express collective needs and spatialize potential transformation pathways (Perkins, 2007). The process can reactivate community cohesion, strengthen organizational capacity, and revive a culture of care toward the territory as a common good. It sets the stage for a transition toward a local self-determined development.

The community mapping process requires two fundamental preliminary steps: the establishment of a group of active citizens responsible for collecting materials and identifying other interested citizens to be involved in focus groups; the definition of thematic focuses to explore and map starting from brainstorming and clustering. Thematic focuses help the collection of data, materials, and information. Also, during the co-exploration phases relationships between thematic focuses and priority interests emerge. While the thematic focuses help concentrating common interests to collect available materials, the brainstorming favour the intersections between different interests, facilitate mutual exchange and create dialogue. The co-exploration and co-design phases are not clearly distinguishable. It is a cyclical process that is based on retroactivity. However, the parallel setting between Community-Spatial-Knowledge and Technical-Spatial-Knowledge (Larrain & McCall, 2019.) allows systematizing the results of each session from time to time and allows the initial frame to be updated.

Technical-Spatial-Knowledge includes both the neutral assessment of local resources and gaps, spatial dynamics, and future projections and the structured outcomes of insights generated by community through interviews, participatory workshops, walks, and storytelling.

Building upon the foundation laid in the co-exploration phase, co-design focuses on translating shared knowledge and values into strategies and actions. The phase has to be anchored in a collective vision of the future, place-based and collectively endorsed by the community. Researchers guide and support the design process by supporting the outlining of objectives, prioritization of actions, and alignment of strategic axes with the identified local potential. They introduce best practices, facilitate synthesis, and ensure scientific accuracy to the process, while also leaving the room for local creativity and ownership. In particular, when the co-exploration phase is primarily focused on mapping, the subsequent co-design phase benefits from a clearer spatialization of ideas, allowing the discussion to concentrate on areas with significant heritage value and on areas that are most in need—and most suitable—for enhancement.

This approach proves especially relevant in inner and rural areas where capacity building may be weaker due to depopulation, abandonment, and marginality. While the presence of researchers can facilitate the transfer of knowledge and best practices, effective empowerment requires that the community is willing and adequately equipped to independently lead and sustain the process and translate it into the capacity to organize actions around shared goals.

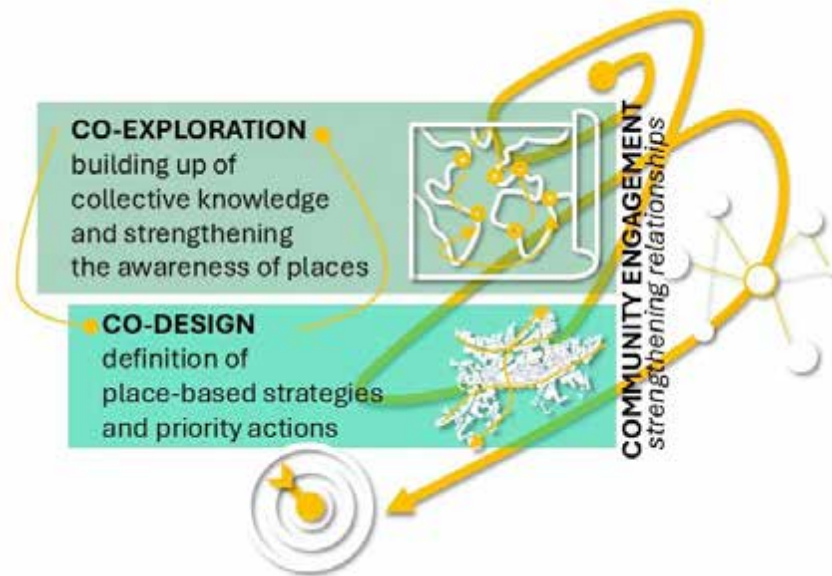
The co-design phase can be developed starting from a SWOT analysis, leading to the definition of general and shared goals, around which the focus groups are formed. Then, general goals can be further detailed in specific goals and actions and a territorial strategy can be outlined by answering three key questions: who? where? when? That is, subjects who might promote an action are identified, places that could be catalysts of transformation are mapped (Wilson and Sanyal, 2013), priority actions and their timeline are established, also by discussing the links with the other actions and the potential barriers to their implementation. As a result, the co-design phase becomes a launchpad for self-sustained development, driven by a community that has regained the sense of responsibility toward the future of its own territory.

The two-stage process briefly outlined is characterized by a cyclical nature and generates a spiral effect involving the community. The two main phases are closely related and intertwine with each other; moreover, community

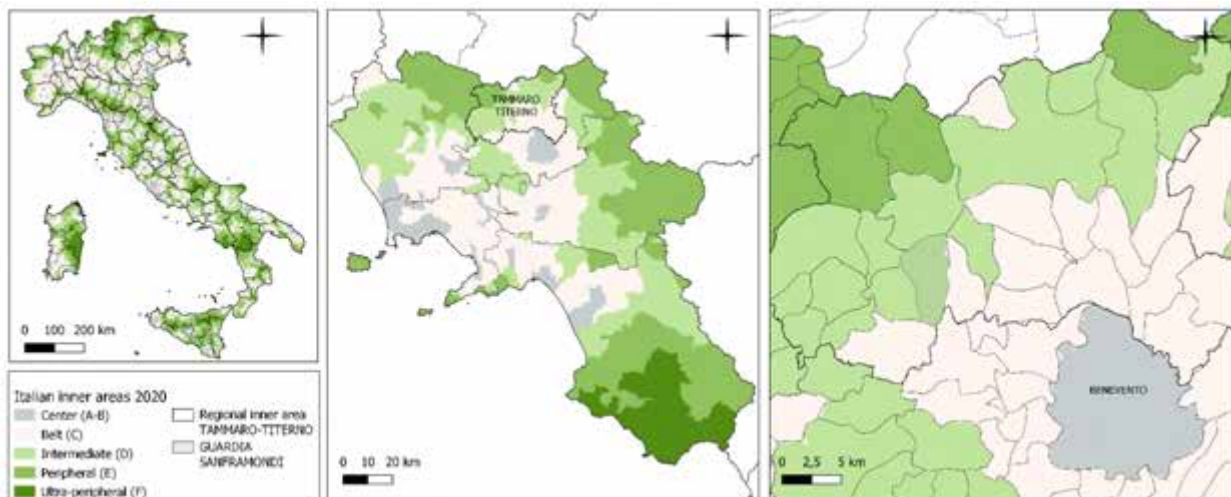
engagement is not limited to the initial identification of the key actors but expands over time feeding both phases (Figure 1). This cyclical process also allows internal evaluation of the work through participant debate, influencing both the method and the outcomes.

### An ongoing experience in Campania region: first outcomes and possible insights

The outlined methodological path is being currently tested on the municipality of Guardia Sanframondi, in the inner area Tammaro-Titerno, one of the NSIA project areas identified in the Campania region for the Province of Benevento (Figure 2).



**Figure 1.** The methodological path  
Source: Authors' elaboration



**Figure 2.** The Italian classification of Inner areas, the Tammaro-Titerno inner area in the Campania Regione and the Municipality of Guardia Sanframondi in the province of Benevento.  
Source: Authors' elaboration

Guardia Sanframondi hosts a population of about 5,000 inhabitants and suffers from a chronic depopulation, like almost all the municipalities of the Tammaro-Titerno area. The municipality is characterized by a valuable, but almost totally abandoned, medieval center and a widespread presence of wine yards, olive groves, and other crops, being agriculture the main income source of the inhabitants.



The work started with the identification of an initial group of stakeholders to investigate the main problems of the place. In particular, the main concern is about the advanced state of abandonment of the historical center, shared both by the community and local institutions. Meanwhile, onsite inspections and desk analysis of demographic and territorial dynamics were started by the research group. The first active citizens already involved during the numerous onsite visits, representatives of local associations and the Mayor were invited to the kick-off meeting. The project was presented, and the main topics of interest were identified to start the co-mapping. After the first meeting, the others took place in small groups in relation to the topics of interest. The co-mapping was accompanied by informal interviews, walks, collection of materials such as photos, testimonies, local bibliography, and labs with high school students. As the knowledge of places and community's dynamics progressed, the meetings were more focused on specific insights and on the involvement of new citizens. The activities specifically focused on co-exploration lasted about six months. At the end, another general meeting officially launched the co-design phase. It should be emphasized that the two phases were not clearly distinct: during the first phase there were many references to possible strategies for the future, in particular for the revitalization of the historic center, and during the second phase the materials collected during the community mapping was further enriched with information especially regarding the places with a great heritage value for the community but underrepresented. However, despite the concerns about the critical issues related to depopulation and physical abandonment, co-exploration activities have attracted much more interest than co-design activities. Even about the involvement of heterogeneous groups of citizens, they welcomed the exchange of ideas in the co-exploration activities better than in the co-design ones, where the work carried out with small, already consolidated groups was more fruitful.

The process itself allowed the understanding of the main barriers for each group of citizens: they partly depend on their age and partly on their way of living the place. Young people show great pride about the history of the place and enthusiasm for a future revitalization, but they hardly think about long-term strategies for living there in the future.

The elderly have less confidence in the possibility of reversing current trends, but they are more open to outline strategies for the future. In general, intergenerational dialogue is difficult. In addition, a large community of foreigners, especially from the United States, lives in the historic center for a few months a year, some of whom have moved permanently. Despite this interesting migratory dynamic, the repopulation of the historic center is not such as to attract sociality. The new inhabitants also promote initiatives for the community, but dialogue with locals is limited by the language barrier.

As an initial reflection on the partial results of the ongoing research, it is worth highlighting the effectiveness of co-mapping tools in both phases of the process. The spatialization of narratives and the shared identification of heritage across the territory not only provided a comprehensive overview of the assets involved, but more importantly, enabled the collective recognition of relationships among places and between places and community. This approach significantly facilitated also the co-exploration phase, helping participants move beyond a focus on isolated physical interventions toward a more integrated territorial strategy, where each place and action is interconnected within a broader, cohesive framework.

## Conclusions

The still ongoing research work already allows some considerations both regarding the effectiveness of the adopted methodology and the results for the case study area.

Guardia Sanframondi hosts a huge tangible and intangible heritage made up of natural resources, agricultural practices, traditions and religious rites, works of art, and literature. Therefore, the choice of rooting a possible revitalization strategy in renewing the relationships between local community and their own heritage is useful not only to provide the community with tools to support a sustaining process of revitalization, but also to strengthen these relationships in a proactive logic and not only in the safeguarding of the past. Also, the choice to accompany the co-exploration phase with co-mapping tools allows the spatialization of both tangible and intangible heritage and facilitate the identification of possible hotspots to trigger a revitalization strategy.

This is important especially for the specific case study because the place does not fully reflect the vitality of the inhabitants, the lively activism, the numerous cultural initiatives, although scattered, promoted by locals, new

inhabitants, university students, artists and scholars, the strong and transgenerational sense of belonging and the widespread knowledge of the past value of places.

An indirect effect of this process, perhaps more important than the outcomes of the two phases, is the reawakened awareness of some involved groups of being direct agents of change, who seized the opportunity and continued their activities independently of the research project.

Finally, it should also be noted that reinforcing the link between heritage and community can promote the effectiveness of public action in facing significant challenge such as securing significant portions of the historic centre.

Nevertheless, public interventions to redevelop buildings risk being ineffective unless they assume a role recognised by the community.

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