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# Dismantling and rebuilding heritage. What does it means in terms of memory?

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The case of submerged settlements in the study of building restoration,  
reconstruction and translation of memories

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## Synopsis

We present a research which principal aim is to study and understand all the processes related to heritage that the massive construction of dams and reservoirs entailed in the central decades of the past century in Italy. We study its repercussion not only in from a building restoration perspective but involving fields such as memory, politics, geography, sociology or anthropology in order to manage all the "reactions" that engage the topic of *collective memory* and therefore constitute an opportunity to build new concepts through which to analyse (and design) very contemporary fields of study that could be applied to improve strategies for the conservation of the values of villages in areas with high seismic risk or hydro-geological instability.

**Key words:** Building restoration; heritage; submerged settlements; memory.

This research is part of an international project involving Spanish, Portuguese, Polish and Italian researchers whose main objective is to investigate restoration and reconstruction in Spain during the Franco regime and how they are connected to other European countries.

In this context, the main objective of our research is a comprehensive examination of a case study common to Italy and Spain: settlements that were submerged as consequence of the construction of water reservoirs in rivers. These operations which are mostly located between the late 1920s-1960s caused a great number of residences in mountainous areas to be flooded. Many residences, disappeared completely under water which led to different phenomena:

One phenomenon was the construction of new population centres with buildings and structures that replicate the look of these lost villages and ancient buildings, or parts of them. This study reveals important data about *why* the State and different agents responsible for the buildings' protection believed it was advisable to conserve those determinate elements. From a technical point of view, it is important to study the experience and the formation of the restorer architects and the precedent cases in these operations of dismantling and transferring monuments.

Another phenomenon was destruction and abandonment. When the architectural elements were considered of no patrimonial value, they were submerged and even, as happened in many cases, dynamited to avoid the survival of the symbols and values linked to them.

The transformation and affectation of the natural environment and the landscape was inevitable. It supposed the creation of new landscapes, with artificial lakes that now are part of our imaginary. Also there is a more contemporary phenomena of the current rediscovery of submerged settlements for tourism purposes.

We study these processes using different historical sources, such as the construction projects, company letters, newspapers, and oral testimonials. We compare this information with its current situation.

On many occasions, communities were displaced from the places they inhabited and were relocated to other localities. In some cases, the displaced citizens were sent to new communities that felt foreign to them. Whether occupied or empty or consolidated as ruins, the old settlements that these citizens abandoned remained linked to the tradition of different populations.

Precisely in this aspect are inserted reflections such as those of Piero Bevilacqua and Manlio Rossi Doria that defines in the half of the 20th century the state of the mountain and the interior areas of Italy as the 'bone' of Italy. This is in contrast to the metaphor of the 'pulp' of the plains applied to the most developed and prosperous agricultural areas. This 'bone' is characterised by sparsely populated or depopulated lands, a dispersed demographic structure, small urban centres built over infertile and rugged soils, and a lack of communication routes and connections with the cities. They constituted a remote geography of poverty in a world in which the development of capitalism and the processes of modernization were transforming the rest of the territory with a speed never experienced until that

moment<sup>1</sup>.

So, starting from the monumental restoration and overcoming the technical analysis of the technique of dismantling and reconstructing monuments and their implications, we try to go further, seeking the perceived values of the historic centres that made up this 'bone' of Italy.

The extreme situation of having to choose what to save from the flood activates the mechanism for selecting *future memories*, that is, which part of history will be remembered and transmitted to the future.

This disassembly of architectures could be seen as a metaphor for the reverse, the retrospective journey that this research has taken through the field of the architecture. From the more technical and specialized part, this research brings us back to its own founding concept why architecture is not only a construction, nor a technical matter. Architecture which is dismantled and reconstructed tells us about its origin. Transferring monuments or parts of them became the explanation of the need to respond to a social need of the inhabitants of the submerged settlements. This people, historically approached to the mountain and accepts the harsh living conditions that this entails. When flood happen they spring back, abandons its land for the benefit of that which we have defined the 'pulp', to which this renunciation will provide water for cultivation and electric energy. While these interventions will create new job opportunities in the mountains and entail a certain type of economic wealth, the trauma of seeing one's roots submerged will always be a constant, as evidenced by the diverse attitudes of these inhabitants with respect to their old houses, which tell us about the social and the memory role of architecture.

On the other hand, this inverse analysis that we are doing allows us, through the detailed study of the conserved and moved parts, to understand which were the most outstanding parts of the pre-existing architecture, those that the diverse entities in charge of their management decided to maintain in order to preserve the collective memory. Those 'saved' parts are the new milestones that this exceptional situation creates. Even if they totally lose their *genus loci*, they continue to have a value as an image, as material 'saved' from the flooding. They isolate themselves from the history of the rest of the architectural elements among which they have been constructed and consolidated and which remain submerged. They become the only witnesses of the existence of the rest. In this process, they charge themselves with a strong meaning, with an added value for those who knew them, which allows us to research in fields such as memory, politics, geography, sociology or anthropology. All 'reactions' that engage the topic of collective memory are an opportunity to build new concepts which we can use to analyse (and design) very contemporary fields of study that go beyond the field of architecture, themes and topics extremely relevant to Italy, such as those related to villages in areas with high seismic risk or hydro-geological instability.

The results of this research not only allows us to increase the historical knowledge of what happened and the processes that enabled them. But also is useful for to design new project strategies for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> BEVILACQUA, Piero, 2002. L'"osso", Rivista Meridiana, Montagna, no. 44, p. 7-13. ISSN 0394-4115

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## Biography

**Irene Ruiz Bazán.** (Saragossa, Spain 1983) is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Department of Architecture and Design of the Polytechnic of Turin (Italy) for the international research involving different european countries: *The 'osso' of Italy. The case study of the submerged settlements: restoration, reconstruction and translation of memories*. She holds a PhD in History of Art, focused on History of Building Restoration of the University of Saragossa (Spain). Her research interests are the analysis of the history of monumental restoration in Europe since the second half of the twentieth century and its implications and relationships with other disciplines such as tourism, politics and the construction of the image of the territory.