

B4R Branding4Resilience. Tourist infrastructure as a tool to enhance small villages by drawing resilient communities and new open habitats

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# LE POLITICHE REGIONALI, LA COESIONE, LE AREE INTERNE E MARGINALI

A cura di  
Federica Corrado, Elena Marchigiani, Anna Marson, Loris Servillo

Società **SIU**  
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# **B4R Branding4Resilience.**

## **Tourist infrastructure as a tool to enhance small villages by drawing resilient communities and new open habitats**

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### **Abstract**

“Marginal” areas are a central issue that is being discussed all over Europe. Indeed, more than 60% of the European population live in peripheral contexts outside of main urban conurbations (Data “EUROSTAT regional yearbook 2013”. Data referred to the sum of the population in ‘intermediate regions’ and in ‘rural areas’ in the EU27). Yet, the contexts addressed by the Italian National Strategy on Inner Areas (covering approximately the 60 per cent of Italy and hosting nearly 13.540 million people) are often lacking successful regional policies and systemic territorial approaches to achieve effective transformations. In order to tackle with such fragile areas, a new development path has to be defined. This paper aims to present and discuss the first results of a PRIN project, “B4R Branding4Resilience”, that investigates fragile territories around the Italian peninsula. Exploring and comparing the areas through an interdisciplinary perspective, the project aims to operatively intervene on selected contexts in Marche Region, Trento Province, Piedmont, and Sicily. A new role of these peripheral contexts in relation to growing metropolitan areas is a possibility that B4R Branding4Resilience aims to investigate.

**Keywords:** branding, resilience, inner areas

### **1 | Framework**

“B4R Branding4Resilience. Tourist infrastructure as a tool to enhance small villages by drawing resilient communities and new open habitats” is a research project of national interest (PRIN 2017 - Young Line) funded by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) with a three years duration (2020-2023). The project is coordinated by the Università Politecnica delle Marche (national coordinator Maddalena Ferretti) and it involves as partners the Università degli Studi di Palermo (local coordinator Barbara Lino), the University of Trento (local coordinator Sara Favargiotti) and the Politecnico di Torino (local coordinator Diana Rolando).

B4R investigates the potential of branding in Italian small villages and inner areas. It proposes the transformation of minimal tourist infrastructures as an engine for the development of more structural territorial development, more resilient communities and new open habitats. Branding, thus, is intended to start processes of re-appropriation and re-settling in marginal areas.

B4R has the double goal to contribute to the state-of-the-art advancement in the different study fields and to propose operative branding actions and strategic visions on four focus areas. Branding here is meant as the engine to reactivate habitats and to draw resilient communities able to respond to contemporary challenges (De Rossi, 2018; Martinelli 2020). Villages and towns are explored in relation with their natural infrastructures and their cultural landscapes and they are re-interpreted through the lens of architectural, urban and landscape design. The research aims at contributing significantly to the National Strategy of Inner Areas (DPS, 2013; MIBACT, 2016) and to the Law for small villages in fragile territories, as well as to answer to the real needs and problems of local communities. The four focus areas are located in the Italian regions of the four research units: Marche, Sicily, Trentino, Piedmont. In each region there are different focuses that relate to different place identities and work on four themes: built heritage, co-creative communities, thermal water, natural environment. Yet, the research units share a common methodological approach: operating on the transformation of the spatial conditions to reactivate these fragile territories through real projects focused on places and communities of people. Through the introduction of minimal tourist infrastructures and the activation of networks, relations and participatory processes (co-design), B4R aims to build a shared future vision (co-visioning) working on legacy as a memory of the past and heritage of tomorrow. Starting from ongoing projects, B4R seeks to work in the four focus areas to foster new polycentric settlement models. The goal is to transform these rural-urban contexts into attractive places for new residents and users and to propose a resilient model for local communities. Starting from relational and experiential tourism, the process should lead to enhancement and territorial development, and in general activate a new metabolism (Carrosio, 2019; Brandano et al., 2020).

## 2 | Research methodology

In this process of progressive adaptation that seeks for new metabolisms – a current challenge in most marginal inner areas – the research aims to address design as a crucial tool of a multi-disciplinary, trans-scalar and multi-level approach capable of activating new economies and new life cycles, promoting a higher quality of space and life for the inhabitants. The project revolves around the design discipline from different perspectives, from architectural design, to planning, to landscape design and real estate appraisal (local coordinators). The team is complemented by additional expertise in each research unit, from territorial development, to computer science and computer supported collaborative work, social statistics, sociology of culture and communication, strategic management, topography and cartography, architectural technology, industrial design, structural engineering. The research units work together to create a common methodological framework through the inputs of this differentiated and multi-tasking research group.

Moreover, B4R displays three methodological aspects:

1. collaboration with local partners to detect strengths and weaknesses of the focus areas (through co-design workshops and other interactions).
2. collaborative and incremental collection of experiences, data, information and experts (through the B4R team and the B4R Platform).
3. formulation of guidelines for policy-makers and communities in a co-design and co-visioning process.

Despite the project's starting point is the tourist infrastructure, intended as an engine for sustainable development, the project relies strongly on the interaction with communities and local stakeholders, who are called to participate and contribute to the formulation of a shared strategy for resilience. Thus, especially in the second year, there are planned initiatives to facilitate knowledge sharing and connectivity between researchers, policy makers, practitioners and other experts.

The project is structured in three main phases, corresponding to as many work packages. A first phase of exploration is helpful to identify and describe the contexts involved from different points of view and with a focus on spatial interactions. Qualitative and quantitative tools are being used. This phase runs parallel in the four regions. A second operative phase is the co-design with communities, with the goal to propose useful transformations of small infrastructures in the selected villages. A third phase is the development of co-visioning processes in collaboration with local actors.

The project will produce:

1. an atlas as a result of the exploration and co-design phase,
2. a web-based collaborative incremental platform to collect experiences and data from the territories and foster the interaction between users and operators in the field of tourism, but also public administrations, associations and local stakeholders;
3. a roadmap of strategic guidelines as an outcome of the co-visioning phase with local actors.

### 3 | Themes. 4 Focus Areas

The main goal of B4R is to promote the enhancement of heritage and local resources in order to trigger a renewed role of peripheries in rural-urban configurations. Strategic territorial development in combination with place-based regeneration actions is the two-folded approach that the research aims to foster. To achieve it, a change of perspective is needed, addressing peripheries as motors of innovation and test-fields for new dynamics of development, looking at the potential resources specifically connected to space, settlements, and landscapes (Schröder J., Carta M., Ferretti M., Lino B., 2018). Here, opportunities linked to built, natural and human capital may be more efficiently connected to forms of relational tourism, through networking, implementation of minimal infrastructures, sharing and participation. The focus of the project is on space transformation, targeting the reactivation of places through small design interventions (e.g. community hubs) able to accommodate social innovation initiatives and accelerate community resilience. Another target is to attract new residents by addressing strategic scenarios (Salewski, 2013; Ferretti M., Schröder J., 2018) in selected contexts, accompanying administrations in the formulation of supporting policies. Tourism, through branding, is therefore only the starting engine for more rooted dynamics of change that regard mainly communities and places.

The project innovation is the integration of “branding” and “resilience”. The branding impulse catalyses tourism and promotes the reactivation of small villages through targeted transformations of built heritage and unused building stock. This would strengthen local economies and favour re-settlement in small depopulated villages (Gómez-Ullate et al., 2020). Sharing and communities networking, in a common strategic view, are also targets of B4R.

The reactivation is addressed to four Italian contexts (focus areas) operating on four different themes: built heritage, co-creative communities, thermal water, natural environment.

#### 3.1 | Built heritage in the Marche inner areas

Within the framework of the research, the Università Politecnica delle Marche is focusing on the topic of “Built Heritage” studying the small villages in the pre-Appennine mountain area between Urbino and Fabriano. The focus area is partly included in Le Marche pilot inner area and partly in its direct connection, with the advantage that the project can rely on former contacts and ongoing agreements with local actors. The area is rich in material and immaterial heritage. It is characterised by medieval villages and traditional rural settlements of the Marche region; important natural areas (Monte Catria, Monte Nerone, Regional Park Gola della Rossa) and water landscapes (Cesano and Metauro); renown regional food products (truffles, bread, wine, artisanal beer). Weaknesses are ageing population, progressive abandonment, economic stagnation (e.g. productive crisis in Fabriano), difficult accessibility and access to primary services. As Marche pilot area for the National Strategy, the area developed a concept of artistic residencies (“Asili d’Appennino”) to be settled in important heritage buildings. The creativity is supported also through the “Advanced Cultural District”. With its spatial focus, B4R aims to complement existing programs. A proactive toolkit to address the branding and accompany the elaboration of experience-based tourist paths through the B4R platform is an expected result. Besides, the RU aims to boost the re-settling process with advanced design and strategic tools, working on territorial characterisation, heritage and existing buildings, natural resources. The RU will support local administrations for branding; explore adaptive reuse of built heritage to host new community services; develop strategic scenarios with municipalities. Besides, customers experience data will be collected and analysed to develop the interactive part of the B4R platform, as a prototype for the four research units (Fig. 1).



Figure 1 | Cagliari, town hall. Source: © Andrea Tessadori

### 3.2 | Co-creative communities in Southern Sicily

The Università degli Studi di Palermo is focusing on the topic of “Co-creative communities” that will be explored studying the small villages in the Sicani Area, and their communities, in Southern Sicily. The RU will explore strategies to strengthen the alliance between social innovation and creativity for tourism and more resilient communities. The FA, despite evidence of marginality, low density, ageing population, increasing out-migration, socio-economic weaknesses, presents some experiences that are generating an innovative social dimension: new eco-creative communities and neo-rural practices are emerging (Carta M., Lino B., Orlando M., 2018). In Cianciana, in the last years, people from Northern Europe and US settled. In Sambuca di Sicilia, the “1 euro houses” project is a good practice that is stimulating the arrival of new inhabitants in the village. Close by, in Sant'Angelo Muxaro the community is exploring forms of relational tourism. Based on investigations on ongoing processes and on the basis of the evaluation of existing resources and governance models, the B4R aims to define a brand focusing on multi-governance creative processes, and social innovation practices as sharing values that can stimulate the active collaboration of the communities, attracting and hosting new residents, building future visions for small municipalities. According to the B4R outputs, the RU will produce an Atlas of the FA, actions, scenarios and guidelines to be included in the Roadmap, supporting the implementation of the B4R strategy for resilient communities and habitats (Fig. 2).



Figure 2 | Sambuca di Sicilia. Source: © Barbara Lino

### 3.3 | Thermal landscapes in Trentino inner areas

In accordance to B4R topics, the main goal of the local unit in Trento, is to pursue leadership in "innovating with nature" through locally implementable actions in the small thermal villages, specifically analyzing the Rabbi valley. The aim is to create a territorial brand on the value of the thermal water systems, by promoting the reuse and enhancement of elements that are part of their territorial capital. Overall goal is to create healthier and greener living habitat through the widest possible participation of civil society, implementing of nature-based solutions focused on improving the quality of life in the study contexts. The development of nature-based activities is promoted in relation to two main environmental systems and ecological trails: blue and green infrastructure. The blue infrastructure corresponds to the network of the water, water and groundwater surface; springs and thermal waters are at the centre of an enhancement process and of urban and regional regeneration also able of acting on occupational and economical improvement. Green infrastructures are the environmental routes that connect together the area's resources; are ecological paths that develop urban links creating a system of environmental resources (Andreucci M.B., 2017); they are high natural spaces included in the thermal basin and are spaces that link the different spatial areas and communities. According to the main outcomes of B4R, the local unit will explore the physical and immaterial qualities, weakness and needs of local communities; map the blueprint of thermal landscape in Trentino Alto-Adige; and organize workshop within local communities to drive scenarios to implement thermal landscapes as resources for the territories. At the end of the project, a set of tools of blue and green infrastructures will be presented to drive branding for resilience in small villages, with the aim to support a sustainable development that connects territories, and drive social, environmental and economic consequences and benefits to improving the quality of life (Fig. 3).



Figure 3 | Val di Rabbi. Source: © Veronique Panciera, 2020

### 3.4 | Natural environment in Northern Piedmont

Assuming the aim of this research, the Politecnico di Torino is focusing on the topic of “Natural environment” by exploring the Valsesia area, which is recognized as the greenest valley in Italy. It takes its name from the river Sesia, which rises in the massif of the Monte Rosa, and includes important protected areas such as the Monte Fenera and Alta Valsesia Natural Park.

The natural environment of this area represents a great tourist and development potential for this region, by offering many opportunities for outdoor sports, such as skiing, river sports and excursions into the wild nature. Furthermore, there are also tourist attractions, such as the Sacred Mount of Varallo and the Sacred Mount of Orta (which have been included in the UNESCO World Heritage List since 2003), examples of Walser colonies, typical suspended footbridges built in 19th century and several hamlets and villages that need to be enhanced and repopulated.

The Valsesia territorial and socio-economic context presents strengths but also numerous weaknesses: population decline and aging, lack of primary services and presence of numerous abandoned buildings.

In accordance to the main B4R expected results, the RU will focus its activities on a multidisciplinary set of approaches and methods in order to foster enhancement actions, strategies, and projects. Five different academic disciplines (Surveying and mapping, Structural engineering, Architectural technology, Design and Real estate appraisal) will be integrated into a process finalized to support the redevelopment of fragile territorial and socio-economic contexts by dialoguing and interacting with municipalities and local stakeholders.

The various competences, which range from the economic evaluation and enhancement to geospatial analyses, territorial modelling, systemic design, technological innovation, structural analyses, will guide the creation of a brand identity of this territory where tangible and intangible assets can be considered potential tourist engines to draw resilient communities (Fig.4).



*Figure 4* | Valle Vogna. Source: © Diana Rolando

#### 4 | Expected results

Five keywords are a sort of tentative preliminary glossary that helps pointing out future research perspectives.

1. Branding: the project defines branding as an engine of development for more resilient habitats and communities that can be responsive and adaptive to contemporary challenges.
2. Resilience: resilience, combined with branding, shows the potential of territories and communities to be enhanced through co-design and co-visioning actions aimed at rediscovering place identity.
3. Habitat: B4R addresses the ‘slow’ contexts of Italian small villages and inner areas by enhancing resources and capabilities to shape high-quality habitats and innovative anti-fragile networks together with local communities.
4. Enhancement: B4R aims to promote the territorial capital, the natural resources and the cultural heritage of fragile territories by means of strategies and economic and territorial enhancement projects.
5. Tourism: B4R strongly aims to promote relational tourism in Italian ‘slow’ territories and to design minimal infrastructures through operative branding actions.

Through the impact on a broader target of stakeholders (policy makers, citizens and practitioners) B4R is expected to:

- create awareness on branding as a tool to foster relational tourism in the four thematic areas;
- develop innovative design and strategic tools through co-design and co-visioning;
- reach a more effective integration between socio-economic, management and planning instruments through a strengthened network of scientific experts, policy makers, and communities;
- support administrators and policy-makers (direct impact), practitioners and citizen (indirect impact) at local and national scale through the formulation of operative branding actions design and strategic scenarios and guidelines, designed with a participatory process with communities and in cooperation with public institutions;

- increase the level of awareness and visioning of communities and local actors, supporting the integration of young energies and talents, transforming the meaning of living in these areas to increase quality of life;
- develop a collaborative web-based platform to connect different users, enable tailored experiences and contribute to the community resilience.

B4R also pursues: social innovation (startups, new jobs, social cohesion); methodological innovation (cross-fertilization multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach); technological innovation (collaborative web-based platform, innovative recycle interventions); media and communication innovation (co-design workshops for sharing and participation); heritage innovation (focus on concrete places, extended interpretation of heritage beyond codified schemes, functional and energetic enhancement of existing structures).

Through these outputs the project targets significant impacts on the involved territories and communities, with regard to social innovation, implementation of expertise, set up of networks, (re)activation of local economies, and (re)settlement processes.

B4R aims to go beyond an idea of development of inner areas as related only to tourism economy. The project interprets inner areas, villages, and landscapes not as target areas for urban users' holidays but first of all as productive territories where rural and cultural innovation can be fostered. Strategic approaches should guarantee not only that basic services (e.g. health, education etc.) are provided, but they should open up to new living and working models with renewed forms of production, welfare, and integration between environment and the built heritage. To do so, it is necessary to work on a systemic network of centers and communities by cooperating for territorial scenarios with the involvement and the support of local stakeholders. Finally, B4R supports territorial strategies and actions that propose interdependent (and not opposing) rural-urban systems to create new visions for a resilient development of Italian inner areas.

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