

Riabitare Alicia. Through different shapes and scales of urban regeneration in Salemi

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ISUF 2022

ŁÓDŹ–KRAKÓW

XXIX INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON URBAN FORM

Urban Redevelopment and Revitalisation. A Multidisciplinary Perspective

6th June – 11th September 2022, Łódź–Kraków

Edited by

Anna Agata Kantarek – Cracow University of Technology, Poland

Małgorzata Hanzl – Lodz University of Technology, Poland

Tomasz Figlus – University of Lodz, Poland

Łukasz Musiaka – University of Lodz, Poland





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Scientific Editors:

Anna Agata Kantarek, Małgorzata Hanzl, Łukasz Musiaka, Tomasz Figlus

Linguistic editing: Joanna Pawliczak

Technical editing and typesetting: Aleksandra Gajderowicz

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Contents

Antonucci Denise, Santiago Gonçalves Willian – Paraisópolis <i>Favela</i> , São Paulo, Brazil: Urban Morphology through the British School.....	1
Batunova Elena, Davletshina Albina, Neugebauer Carola – Protracted Transition. Management of residential built heritage in the historic center of Rostov-on-Don, Russia.....	16
Beltran-Borràs Júlia – On the Search for Transparency between Contemporary Design and the History of the Place.....	29
Benabdallah Nawal – Urban projects in Casablanca: New Urban forms in experimentation.....	40
Bisbal Grandal Ignacio, Mariona Oliver, Sabatini Downey Francisco, Silvestro Jose María – Residential real estate financing and urban form in Latin American medium-sized cities: Comparative study between Concepción (Chile) and Mendoza (Argentina).....	53
Bolton Liam Thomas – A Quantitative Analysis of the Exoadaptivity of Buildings in London.....	69
Cai Jiaxiu, Lin Xiaoyu, Liu Hanlu, Liang Xinying, Lin Yuxin, Wang Qi – An across scale comparative morphological analysis Mapping the landscape structure of Lingnan and Jiangnan.....	81
Chaiwat Pamancee, Neis Hans Joachim – A refugee pattern language – Rpl 9: Design and construction for refugees.....	90
Che Jihyun, Kim Saehoon, Lee JaeSeung – The impact of COVID-19 on the economic resilience and spatial vitality of urban commercial cluster.....	104
Chen Liran – Study on the Evolution of the Relationship between Urban Housing Space and Topography in Chongqing’s Mountainous Old-town Riverfront in China’s Reform Era: An Environmental History’s Perspective.....	118
Chen Changyu, Wan Hongyu, Wang Fan, Huang Chengcheng – Human-centered urban design analytics integrating data-informed and evidence-based approaches: A micro-renewal case in Shanghai.....	132
Chen Yishan, Yang Qiao, Wu Mingbo – The impact of the Three Gorges Project and heritage protection on the form of Shibao Town, China.....	142
Cheng Yue, He Yong, Shangguan Keer – Element Identification of Spatial Disorder in Northeast China’s Cities – A Study Using Photovoice Method.....	154
Chizzoniti Giuseppe Domenico, Lolli Tommaso, Maruelli Elisa – The multicentric renewal of small cities through public space. The post-earthquake situation of Montorio al Vomano (TE) – Italy.....	166
Chu Tong – Study on the Evolution of Urban Form Types in Historical Districts from the Perspective of Industrial Agglomeration Process: A Case Study of East Beijing Road Hardware Street in Shanghai.....	181
Crapolicchio Martina – Describing and prescribing. Transitional Morphologies in Rimini, Italy.....	190
Crosas Armengol Carles, Gómez-Escoda Eulàlia, Villavieja Martínez Enric – From Land-Use Planning to Mixed-Use Configuration. Similarities and Differences in two Urban Fragments of Barcelona Metropolis....	200
Dai Xin, Tang Luojie, Tan Wenyong – A Structural and Morphological Analysis of the Road Network of Ancient Mountain Towns: A Case Study of China’s Longxing Town.....	212
Dayal Arpita – Shifting Spaces of Resistance: A Processual Study of the Recent Protests in the Everyday in Delhi.....	224
Della Scala Valerio, Dini Roberto, Lanteri Silvia – Riabitare Alicia. Through different shapes and scales of urban regeneration in Salemi.....	236
Delgado Alina, Torres Juan Carlos – A Morphological Analysis for the Inclusion of Social Housing Projects in the Centre of Guayaquil, a Restriction or an Opportunity.....	249
Deng Hao, Chen Fei – Urban Corners in Guangzhou: Desing, Morphology and Everyday Life, 1757–1949	264

Djokić Vladan, Milojević Milica P., Milovanović Aleksandra, Djordjević Aleksandra, Pešić Mladen – ISUF vs. HERSUS Glossary: Correlating Urban Morphology to Heritage Awareness and Sustainability of Built Environment.....	281
Ellenbogen Nirit Rivka, Trivic Zdravko , – Dynamic Place Attachment as Enabler in Redevelopment Programs of Singapore Public Housing Neighborhoods.....	294
Fava Lins Ana Clara, Ferreira Leite de Mello Caroline, Zigiatti Monteiro Evandro – The role of the open public spaces during the pandemic: A case study of ‘Parque Ibirapuera’.....	309
Fusco Giovanni, Araldi Alessandro, Emsellem David, Overall Denis – Taxonomy of contemporary urban forms in France: Towards an Urban Atlas through Multiple Fabric Assessment.....	323
Ge Xuan, Wang Guoguang, Zhang Shifu – Study on Clustering of Urban Morphology Control Units Based on Risk Theory.....	341
Gohaud Emilien, Schuetze Thorsten – Morphological regionalization for the urban renovation agenda in Daegu, South Korea.....	353
Gloaguen Thomas, Zaleckis Kęstutis, Gadal Sébastien – Development of new indexes of the ‘Generic City’ in the Baltic coastal city network.....	365
Gomez-Escoda Eulalia, Fuertes Pere – Proximity and temporality: The role of weekly markets in the metropolitan food system of Barcelona.....	379
Gopal Arathy, Mathur Mayank, Singh Mandeep – Change in Urban form along streets in Historic cities with Religious cores.....	392
Gortazar-Balardi Ander, Markusiewicz Jacek – Combined Accessibility Index for Public Transport Networks The case of Donostia / San Sebastián.....	410
Guo Fangjie – Chinese Economic Transition and the Evolution of Liuhua Clothing Wholesale District in Guangzhou, China.....	420
Guo Weihong, Ding Yaqian, Yang Guang, Liu Xiao – A Comparative Study on the Spatial Capacity of University Campuses in Guangdong Province.....	432
Hafizoğlu Eda, Sema Kubat Ayşe – A Historico-geographical approach of Fringe-Belt Phenomena in Kadıköy, Istanbul.....	448
He Fang, He Yong, Sun Liang – A Study on Color Application and Perception in Urban Neighborhood Renewal Based on Simulation Comparison: Taking the Case of Kuangdaxuefu Street in Xuzhou, China....	466
Hu Miaofen, Yan Shuiyu – The Study of Xi ‘an Unitary Settlements’ Redevelopment Strategy in “Mobility Space” Aspect.....	477
Hu Yushan, Yang Li – Construction of flood control planning model for historical and cultural towns near the river: Taking Daxu Ancient Town as an example.....	483
Huang Xiaoying – A Research Study on Historical Preservation and Urban Renewal of the Bund.....	493
Huang Qilin, Jiang Zhengliang – ‘Landscape’ and its atlas analysis of Coastal heritage cities in China.....	502
Hwang Ah Sun – Suggestion of the necessity of urban redevelopment combining cooperative planning theory and urban form characteristic analysis.....	510
Iskusov Nikita – The Right to Housing: Differentiation of Practices in implementing Resettlement of Emergency Housing Stock Policy in Arkhangelsk.....	519
Jalan Advaita – Metamorphosis of Cultural Identity of Traditional and Non-Traditional Gated Communities: A Study of Vadodara, India.....	534
Jang Gukhwa, Kim Saehoon, Lee Jae Seung , – The evaluation of heat-mitigation strategies on outdoor heat stress in the waterfront public spaces.....	550
Jin Jiayi, Bertolino Nadia, Huang Kexin – Gender Walks in the City: An Exploratory Study on Gender-Responsive Urban Planning.....	565
Jiang Shan, Zheng Liang, Chen Yile, Zheng Jianyi – Comparison analysis on typical historic cultural districts with AI machine learning technology – Taking Portuguese and Macao districts as examples.....	576
Jiang Qiaochu, Zhou Qi – The Functional Transformation on Urban Railway Heritage: A Case Study of Pukow Railway Station.....	588

Jing Wanqi, Han Chenyang – Morphological characteristics of the waterfront ancient fortress settlement in South-eastern Shanxi based on System Theory: Space Syntax Analyses of Fort Diji in the Qinhe River Basin, China.....	601
Josipovič Damir – The paradox of empty apartments and huge daily commuting in Ljubljana: Failures of the urban management.....	616
Karaselnikova Maria – Peculiarities and Pathways of Single-Family Housing Development in Russian Major Cities.....	624
Karaselnikova Maria, Maltseva Daria, Iskusov Nikita, Fadeeva Ekaterina, Mardanov Linar, Pisareva Maria, Kharitonov Mikhail, Elkina Elizaveta – Reality vs Regulation: Informal Practices of Spatial Development in Krasnodar, Russia.....	637
Karbalaei Hassani Elham – The effects of supergrids and superblocs on the transformation of the historic urban fabric of Kashan city in Iran.....	653
Kilje Bim, Stojanovski Todor – Urban Morphology and Anthropology – Synergies and a Joint Language.....	663
Kleszcz Justyna – Revitalisation of urban infrastructural and industrial facilities for the function of urban agriculture – examples of good practice.....	671
Klopfer Florian – Climate (In-) Justice in German Cities? Assessing the Relationship between Land Surface Temperature and Affordability of Housing.....	683
Kopp Lukas, Rypar Vit, Havlova Zdenka – From street network topology to generic accessibility indices: Supraposition of Graph theory measures on morphological localities.....	696
Kowalski Kamil, Hanzl Małgorzata – Transformation of urban tissue along downtown arteries Morphometric evaluation of resilient urban form.....	719
Krawecka Margaret, Thornberg Josep Muntañola – Dancing on the peripheries: Performative architecture and cultural diversity in the city of Barcelona today.....	730
Kroc Tomasz, Szewczyk Kacper – Transformation of urban spaces of preindustrial cities in contemporary Lodzkie Voivodeship. Heritage preservation perspectives in interdisciplinary approach.....	745
Kubat Ayse Sema, Kurtulus Irem, Kucuk Caliskan Ezgi – Decoded city: Reading the Historical Peninsula of Istanbul under the shadow of different empires with multi-methods and approaches.....	762
Kubin Stefan Johannes, Psenner Angelika – Siegfried Sitte: Forgotten Urban Designs.....	768
Lee Ming-Chun – Greenways as an Integrated Urban Planning and Design Strategy: A Case Study of Charlotte Metropolitan USA.....	779
Leung Ming Tze, Lin Minqi, Yu Peiheng – An Investigation on the Use of Deep Generative Model in Urban Land Use Planning.....	788
Li Ningcong – Morphological design strategies for the renewal of Jiangnan vernacular buildings under the concept of sharing.....	799
Li Jun, Feng Jiang – Roads, plots and building types in the implementation of urban renewal planning: A case study of Canton, China in the early 20 th century.....	811
Li Xiangbei, Li Wenxia – Redevelopment and Revitalization of Urban Units: A Case Study of the Extended Area of Longmenhao Historical Block in Chongqing.....	827
Li Keran, Lin Yan, Xie Yuhu – Research on the informal urban space and the methods of urban design: Based on two Chinese handscrolls in Qing Dynasty.....	840
Li Xu, Luo Qiuyi – Research on Evolution law and driving factors of rural settlements in hilly areas of western Chongqing from the perspective of urban-rural interaction – A case study of Yongchuan District in Chongqing.....	855
Li Xu, Wang Xiaofang – Research on Climate Adaptation of Bayu Traditional Settlements.....	864
Li Hui, Zhu Yuan – TOD-Led Urban Evolution: An Analysis of the Renewal Strategy of London King's Cross.....	875
Lin Li, Deng Hao – Urban Design Thinking of Early Modernist Pioneers – Taking Adolf Loos and Giuseppe Terragni as Case Studies.....	886
Liu Rongling – Research on the types of old community public spaces of elderly-young interaction – Take Hebei Province of China as case study.....	895
Liu Shuhu, Kang Zhen, Feng Manling – An analysis of the spatial evolution and construction experience of the Ancient Fuzhou City.....	905

Liu Yihan, Li Jianwei – Polarized Historical Preservation Trajectories: Comparative Studies of Tongli Town and Yaowan Town.....	915
Liu Yiran, Pezzetti Laura Anna, Zhao Chen – Cognizing Chinese Historic Urban Space by Integrating Morphology and Narrativity. Taking the Mendong Area in Nanjing as an Example.....	925
Liu Yidan, Tang Lian, Ding Wowo – Typo-morphology in the Urban Renewal Application – Case Study of Urban Design Project in Changting Town, China	936
Lu Tingying, Wang Yanchu – ‘Floating Island’ and ‘Veranda’: Sharing Media in Urban Shanshui.....	962
Luescher Andreas, Shetty Sujata – Reimagining Urban Identity within a Legacy City.....	974
Luo Zixin, Zhu Yuan – Research on Resilient Strategies for Urban Redevelopment in Rail Station Areas....	986
Ma Zhijie – Evolution of production-living-ecological space in peri-urban area: A case study in Machong Town, Dongguan City.....	997
Mader Malgorzata – Amsterdam’s Post-war Buildings Transformations in Bottom-up Processes. The Role of Municipal Housing Policy, Architects and Collaborative Groups of Future Residents in DIY (Klushuis) Affordable Housing Idea.....	1011
Mahajan Manu – ‘Cultural Turn’ in Old Delhi – post Metro.....	1026
Mancini Francesco, Glusac Tanja – Fragment, Field and Frame: Reflection on Heritage, Contemporary City and its Identity. The case of Perth, WA.....	1040
Maretto Marco, Finizza Chiara, Monacelli Alice – The role of the neighbourhood ‘social-building’ unit as a tool for the construction and transformation of the contemporary city. Two case studies in Venice and Tokyo.....	1052
Marshall Stephen – Towards an urban mereology: A generic framework for urban part-whole relationships.....	1067
Martyka Anna, Jopek Dorota – Importance of medieval urban tissue in the contemporary realities of a rural commune in the Polish Subcarpathia. Cases of Dębowiec, Jaślińska and Osiek Jasielski.....	1079
Mawlan Muhetar, Xia Yue, Liang Gu, Huang Chenyi, Tang Lian – Measuring the perceptual quality of pedestrian public space in contemporary Chinese cities – Taking Xinjiekou area in Nanjing as an example.....	1093
Mustafiz Al Mamun, Tasnim Tasfia, Tabassum Labonno Tasnuva, Afroz Sharmin, Jahan Israt – ‘How to preserve the historical essence through recognising and the effective use of historic urban structure?’ – A Case of Kalurghat Bridge at Chattogram.....	1106
Meng Chengyu – Exploring the relationship between polder morphology and land system.....	1119
Mitrović Nikola – Urban Highway Areas: Reconsidering Morphological Elements of the Approach to Urban Studies.....	1125
Moreno Daniel – Evolution of urban renewal and verticalization: The case of the Santiago Metropolitan Area between 1990 and 2019.....	1132
Naghibi Maryam, Forgaci Claudiu, Faizi Mohsen – Spatial fragmentation as an opportunity for resilience building through urban acupuncture: Learning from Tehran and Bucharest.....	1144
Neis Joachim (Hajo), Pamaneé Chaiwat – A world of thousand independent regions. Transforming the World to Small Countries as ‘Independent Regions’.....	1157
Nekrasova Ekaterina – Revitalization of Brownfields in Russian and Baltic Cities: Comparing Interaction Models between Stakeholders in Development Projects.....	1173
Ni Haozhan, He Yong, Di Yizhuo, Wu Hao – Research on renovation strategy of existing residential areas in Shanghai from the perspective of residential satisfaction.....	1191
O’Connell Derry –Adapting the Town to a Diffusing Retail Interface.....	1202
Oguz Irem, Kubat Ayşe Sema, Kaya H. Serdar – Exploring the Effects of Tourism on Fringe Belt Areas: The Case of Antalya, Turkey.....	1208
Oikonomou Maria, Christodoulou Charis – Evolution and transformation processes of urban form: Urban tissues in Thessaloniki, Greece.....	1225
Okretic Gabrielle, Mudo Eloise, Viana Franklin, Adrião Yara, Adilson Manuel, Mendes Brenda, Holanda Virginia, Farias Cicera – Academic contribution to collective building of the city – An experience in the countryside of Ceará – Brazil.....	1236
Okretic Gabrielle, Mudo Eloise, Viana Franklin, Adilson Manuel, Adrião Yara, Mendes Brenda, Holanda Virginia, Cicera Farias – The collective construction of planning in small cities– the experience of technical assistance in the construction of the Master Plan for Carnaubal.....	1248

Pichihua Yeimis Milton Palomino – The Latin American city recodified? Pandemic and emerging urban legislation.....	1272
Pietrogrande Enrico, Dalla Caneva Alessandro – A piazza for Pedavena in the Belluno Dolomites: Towards recognition of an urban identity.....	1279
Prouin Clément, Fusco Giovanni, Caglioni Matteo, Overall Denis – Morphogenesis of urban peripheries in the 20 th century: Examples from the French Riviera.....	1288
Psenner Angelika, Tobisch Susanne – On Streets. Streets as an Element of Urban Fabric.....	1304
Qian Zhu – Political, legal and administrative conditions for urban ecological tissue renewal: an investigation of a national wetland park in China.....	1328
Racine François – Reading and understanding built environments in Quebec (Canada): Urban morphology at the service of a sustainable urban design approach.....	1341
Remesar Antoni, Vergel Javier – Bon Pastor (Barcelona) A neighbourhood with a future? What future?.....	1357
Rezgui Hana, Ait Haddou Hassan, Camilleri Guy – Towards an organizational model of BIM practice based on collaborative engineering.....	1368
Riondino Vito Antonio – The places of the crisis as a gnoseological field of new interpretative processes...	1377
Rociola Francesco Giuseppe – Jerusalem beyond the walls.....	1386
Sandalack A. Beverly – The Causes and Consequences of School Closures in Inner-City Calgary.....	1398
Sandalack A. Beverly – Landscape Approaches to Climate Change, Economics and Pandemics – Rethinking Calgary Parks and Open Space Systems.....	1411
Sarihan Elif – The Concept of the Urban Palimpsest. The Urban Fabric Transformations in Inherited City image.....	1424
Schroeder Stella – Transformation processes in informal produced public spaces.....	1438
Şik Seyrek Cansu Iraz, Widera Barbara – Comparative analysis of vertical green façades with movable panels from the perspective of their thermal performance and applicability in sustainable urban areas.....	1451
Siliang He, Yinsheng Tian – Fringe Belt Phenomenon in Chinese metropolis: A Case Study of Guangzhou...	1463
Stellacci Stefania – Re-building untold histories to preserve historical fragments along the street <i>Rua do Benfornoso</i> in Lisbon.....	1475
Stojanovski Todor, Kirt Strandbygaard Sofie, Maudsley Ann, Abarkan Abdellah – Swedish and Danish typomorphology – The historical approaches and new conceptualizations for informing urban design.....	1484
Sukhbaatar Amgalan, Togtokhbayar Munkh-Erdene – ‘Redevelopment’ from low-rise collective housing to free-market-driven towers: Neighborhood-scale urban morphology in Ulaanbaatar.....	1497
Sun Yuan, Wang Zhu, Zhou Congyue – Evolutionary analysis between geographic typology and urban morphology of Jiangnan historical watertowns in northern Zhejiang, China.....	1505
Tomczak Joanna – A study on the space composition designed by Stanislaw Niemczyk in the context of evolving religiousness and spirituality.....	1518
Toprak Ilgi – ‘Serial vision’ as a method for exploring street vitality and urban change.....	1530
Trabattoni Luca, Capotorto Margherita – The city of entertainment as an experimentation field for improving the daily public space.....	1537
Trisciuglio Marco – From Iconographies to Morphologies. An Overview on European and Chinese Urban Forms through 10 Images.....	1551
Turk Didem – A Deep Learning Approach for Urban Block: Automated Extraction Tool for Urban Forms.....	1560
Uribe Alaniz Francisco – Re-imagining Crowsnest Pass: Findings ways of redeveloping/reskilling a coal mining community.....	1570
Usó Martín Fernando, Palomares Figueres María Teresa, Such Carmen Jordá, Bernad Iborra Federico, Martínez Carmel Gradolí, Pascual Herrero Vicent – Modern urban form renewal at Cheste Workers University.....	1587
Usui Hiroyuki – Optimal floor height to estimate building height from the number of storeys considering building use in the Tokyo metropolitan region.....	1601
Utzig Lukas, Karimi Kayvan – Urban segregation of London social housing estates: Measuring access to the city and the question of regeneration.....	1611

Utzig Lukas, Vaughan Laura, Misselwitz Philipp – Retain or Rebuild: Different Pathways of Redevelopment in Urbanising Chinese Villages.....	1622
Vannelli Giovangiuseppe – Think outside the box. Towards new transient morphologies: The case of post-emergency housing.....	1634
Venerandi Alessandro, Zamani Vahid, Porta Sergio – On the relationship between urban form and amenities: A new perspective from Qom (Iran).....	1650
Vicuña Magdalena – Urban verticalization morphologies: applying the anatomies of density theory in three Chilean metropolitan areas.....	1663
Wang Yanchu – From a Historic Place to a Sharing Campus: Case Study of the Santa Teresa Campus of the University of Florence.....	1674
Wang Han, Bao Li – Exploration design on public and open space along the city wall based on typomorphological research.....	1687
Wang Hanyan, Xu Kai – Opening-up of extra-large blocks in China.....	1703
Wang Zhongwei, He Yong – Research on the Configuration of Supporting Facilities based on the Perspective of Living Circle – A Case Study of Wujiang District, Suzhou, China.....	1715
Wang Zhixuan, Sheng Qiang – Differences of breakfast Spatial Distribution in Real and Virtual Space: An empirical study in the central city of Beijing.....	1728
Wang Jiayin, Yang Fan – Research on the urban residential space fabric based on complex network analysis. Evidence from built-up urban area of Shanghai.....	1739
Wei Jia, Lijun Wang – A study on the type pedigree of Chinese traditional settlement centrality spatial schema....	1754
Wei Hanyu, Wang Guoguang – A Review on Dynamic Conservation of Ancient Cities from the Perspective of Urban Morphology.....	1763
Wei Hanyu, Chen Jiaxin, Wang Guoguang – Spatial-temporal Changes and Driving Forces of Nanning San Jie Liang Xiang from 1947 to 2020.....	1774
Wu Yihao – Morphological Transformation of Historic City Center in Modernization based on Map Archive – Case Study of Hangzhou.....	1790
Wu Jianchi, Feng Jiang – The intertidal zone and waterfront – A study on the morphological mechanism of the marshland zone in the south of Guangzhou city.....	1802
Wu Yilong, Liu Yuqiu – From formality to informality: “Sharing Planners’ as a design method in urban development of Tilanqiao Lilong residential area.....	1818
Wu Jingfen, Sheng Qiang – Spatial Resilience of Local Places: A comparative study on Beijing’s breakfast service before and after Covid-19.....	1829
Wu Jingfen, Sheng Qiang, Li Xinyi – Research on Quantitative Evaluation and Influencing Factors of the Vitality of Newsstand – an example of Beijing.....	1841
Wu Jingfen, Sheng Qiang, Zeyang Xu – The spatial resilience of the community’s commercial vitality: Comparative study on spatial renovation of Beijing Hutong district before and after.....	1852
Xia Xuefei – To solve the problem of low utilization of space under viaduct by sharing strategy.....	1864
Xie Yuhu, Lin Yan, Li Keran – Research on the integration path of historicity and life of urban Space – Taking Xuzhou Context Axis as an example.....	1877
Xiong Xiangrui, Wang Yanhui, Sabaté-Bel Joaquín – Historic structure and cultural consciousness: The space regeneration of Jinling Machinery Manufacturing Bureau, China.....	1885
Xu Chen – Spatial form compact development path of coal mining cities – take Tangshan as an example.....	1898
Xu Jiaqi – Exploration of the Renewal Strategy of Historic and Cultural District by the Mean of Sharing – an example of Shanghai Tilanqiao Area.....	1912
Xuanbing Yang – Scale and composition, a strategy of redeveloping the historic area in Shanghai Old Town.....	1926
Yang Li, Hu Yushan – Impacts of daily supply on the layout of small commercial outlets in old communities: A Case Study of Shapingba street, Chongqing, China.....	1938
Yang Mingxing, Tian Yinsheng – Research on the resilience assessment method of urban form based on ‘resolution’.....	1949
Yang Shuya, Tian Yinsheng, Li Gang – The System of Floor-area-ratio (FAR) Transfer for Historical District Preservation and Renewal: Guangzhou’s and Taipei’s Experiences in a Comparative Perspective.....	1956

Yoon Soyoung, Kim SaeHoon, Lee JaeSeung – Strategies to enhance the competitiveness of the city by realization of publicness.....	1964
Zamani Vahid, Mohammadi Mahmoud, Ghalehnoee Mahmoud – Morphological Investigation of the Urban Form of Qom (Iran) at the Micro-scale: Spatial Distribution of Streets and Activities.....	1970
Zeng Yue, Yuan Qifeng – Social determinants behind water towns in Pearl River Delta, China whose historical tissues survive the impact of industrialization: Take three towns within the Sangyuanwei world heritage irrigation structures as examples.....	1979
Zhand Sepehr – Political reform and the form of the city – Reading through the adoption of modern planning in Tehran using space syntax.....	1990
Zhang Nan – Changes in the landscape pattern of the north bank of Xiyuan based on drawing archives (1669–1980).....	2008
Zhang Nan, Huang Qilin, Jiang Zhengliang, Li Sai – The Types and Distribution of Urban Image ‘Composite Pattern’ – An Empirical Study based on Qingdao, China.....	2019
Zhang Suxin, Jachna Joseph Timothy, Ma Yuanhong – The dialogues in the regeneration of metropolitan heritage conservation areas: Case of Pingjiang Area, Suzhou.....	2024
Zhao Dongqi, Pezzetti Laura – Interpreting urban voids as the morphological reading tool of Historic Urban Landscape: The case study of former British concession in Tientsin.....	2035
Zhu Yuan, Wang Hao – Isochronal 3D-station realm model and Multi-data based urban renovation strategies in TOD development – a case in Heifei, China.....	2046
Zhuo Xingyu, Hu Yushan, Yang Li – Spatial analysis and protection of traditional villages based on spatial syntax: A case study of Linlue Village of the Dong ethnic group in Sanjiang, Guangxi.....	2055
Zhuoyuan Sun, Yong Huang – Discussion on the effect of topographic barrier on the morphology of Chinese mountainous cities: an example of Southwest China.....	2064
Zlatinova-Pavlova Veneta – Balancing the Quality of Public Good within the Dynamics of Urban Form. Experiences from the redevelopment of residential areas in Bulgaria.....	2074

Valerio Della Scala, Roberto Dini, Silvia Lanteri

DAD – Dipartimento Architettura e Design, Politecnico di Torino, Italy

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Riabitare Alicia. Through different shapes and scales of urban regeneration in Salemi

Abstract The main objective of this work is to understand the role that punctual project actions can play within broader territorial systems, crossing the municipal dimension to extend to the micro-regional one, observing the weight that this kind of realities can assume within the debate on the inner areas in recent years: the moment of crisis is reinterpreted as an opportunity for reflection and transformation, the ruins become the ideal material for fielding design experiments within a dimension that is not only formal but processual and regulatory, producing a very dense layering of spatial outcomes and visions for the future, in which reading and design intertwine to construct new imaginaries.

In doing so, the city of Salemi – and more extensively the Belice territory – is taken as an open-air urban experimental bench, exploring possible trajectories of regeneration through spatial interpretation and meta-projects at the urban and architectural scales.

Keywords Salemi, Belice, Riabitare Alicia, urban regeneration, mapping and drawing.

Introduction

This paper aims to summarise the central nodes of the research called *Riabitare Alicia* that has involved the three authors in recent years.

Initially, it proposes a cognitive framework of the research area, in terms of the Belice valley and more in-depth the municipality of Salemi, affected by the severe earthquake of the late 60s, on which the research group worked through teaching activities, and later thanks to Fondazione Sicilia's grant focused on depopulating villages. The second part of the paper describes the cognitive tools deployed, highlighting the strong interconnection between critical cognitive mapping and design at different scales.

Finally, it presents some meta-design explorations focused on the historic centre of the city of Salemi, functional to understand the impact that design images can have on both the physical shape of urban space and its regulatory tools, highlighting the link between research and action through design.

The background of the research

The current configuration of the Belice territory – which has historically constituted an isotropic aggregate in terms of productive vocation, population density and settlement typologies – can nowadays be considered as the outcome of the transformations following the tragic earthquake of 1968, redefining its administrative boundaries, urban morphologies and spatial relationships. The characters of this micro-region appear significant today with respect to the national debate on the theme of inner areas, in relation to demographic issues (depopulation above all) and possible reflections on the future of a substantial part of a heritage that is getting abandoned. Indeed, in the 1960s the traumatic event disrupted the established relationships between the elements of this system, generating new transformative margins: new forms of living, new urban hierarchies and unprecedented connections for these towns, including Salemi. This is due both to the direct collapses of the urban fabric and to the administration's substantial policies of acquisition of properties located in the historic centre and the consequent series of operations aimed at the recovery of this part of the city, historically called Alicia.



Figure 1. The view from the open-air theatre designed by Marcella Aprile, Roberto Collovà and Alvaro Siza Vieira (1984–1987)
Source: Photo by Alessandro Depaoli.



Figure 2. The rearrangement of Piazza Alicia and the surrounding roads by Roberto Collovà and Alvaro Siza Vieira (1991–1998)

Source: Photo by Alessandro Depaoli.

Beyond the specificity of individual operations only partially completed¹, the most relevant legacies of that season - in Salemi and extensively in the Belice – in terms of new transformative occasions derive precisely from the redefinition of municipal property and, therefore, from the possibility of rethinking the large amount of public properties. While it is true that this has in many cases become a managerial and financial burden for the municipality, it is also true that the recent policies of intervention around the historical city centre in Salemi largely coincided with the identification of latent potential contained in that configuration. In the last years the public administration has been promoting numerous strategies in this sense: from the *Leurohome* operation – recalling the campaign promoted by the Sgarbi administration in 2011 – through the emergence of cultural organizations, it aimed at enhancing the village. This was possible also thanks to the municipality's ability to establish a dialogue with research organizations and universities on the national and international scene. It is within this network that Politecnico di Torino has assumed a central role, formalized first through a memorandum of understanding signed in 2018, then in 2020 with the launch of the research project *Riabitare Alicia* - coordinated by Politecnico di Torino (Dipartimento Architettura e Design), in partnership with the municipality and the association WISH, financed by Fondazione Sicilia through a competitive bid – whose object is the elaboration of possible transformation scenarios for the ancient town and its proximity area².

The outcomes produced by the study highlight how Salemi has been and can still be today an open-air laboratory for urban regeneration, a place of confrontation, dialogue, study and experimentation of innovative planning that, under different forms, has spanned the decades up to the present day. A useful opportunity to combine research and action (Candy 2006; Schön 1983; Sequeira 2011). The main intent of the project was to combine particular processes and minute actions with the construction of broader scenarios. An objective that comes through the adoption of a strongly multidisciplinary approach, oriented to hold together very different scales of analysis and action: on the one hand, the problematization of issues with a regional relevance stimulates the construction of broad frames of meaning for the research, identifying circuits to insert regenerative strategies which then became a support for the definition of different but complementary transformation scenarios - a hub for Mediterranean culture, research and development centre for innovative agriculture and food and wine production, to name a few. On the other hand, the analysis produced a series of guidelines working from the urban to the architectural scale, with the intention of reasoning about the tools that regulate the project itself, using some morphological explorations to reflect on possible actions and tools that the project deploys.

The images produced at the various scales occupy a hybrid space between the critical reading of the present situation and strategic visions aimed at orienting possible future interventions: analytical maps, design schemes, diagrams and infographics, architectural and urban representations emphasize the link between material and immaterial networks, between economies and landscape, between single artefact and overall spatial system, trying to focus on some implicit questions within which to define possible mechanisms for reactivating depopulated areas.

Critical mapping and drawing as a design tool

The first step of the research was focused on observing the territory at a dilated scale, through both its material and immaterial forms, trying to return some synthesis able to lead subsequent design considerations. A large number of maps at the regional and micro-regional scales were then drawn up, interweaving different sources and datanases: Sistema Informativo Territoriale della Regione Sicilia, Rete del Sistema Informativo Nazionale Ambientale, ISPRA Ambiente, Istat, Osservatorio statistico INPS, Istituto Nazionale di Geofisica e Vulcanologia, portale Logis (Sistemi Informativi per il Territorio e per l'Ambiente), OpenData Regione Sicilia.

Critical visions were then developed from the issues that emerged from these maps, images that can provide interpretations of possible systems to be enhanced at the scale of both the Belice valley and Salemi municipality. Thus it emerges a complex figure, which goes beyond the dimensions of description to take on a strongly critical and planning nature (Viganò 2010). A dense figure that makes explicit some of the tensions inherent in the project, which becomes a tool for hierarchizing and interpreting the palimpsest of networks, traces and dynamics observed through the scaffold of analyses and maps that preceded it.

¹ Specifically, the reference is to the Laboratorio Belice 80, with the project of the open-air theatre (Marcella Aprile, Roberto Collovà, Alvaro Siza Vieira, 1984–1987), the rearrangement of Piazza Alicia and the surrounding roads (Roberto Collovà, Alvaro Siza Vieira, 1991–1998) and the recovery plan of the 'Cascio' neighborhood (unrealized) (Collovà, Siza Vieira 1990). See also: (De Bonis, Gangemi, Renna 1979; Guerrasi, La Monica 1997; Venezia, Jodice 1992); the monographic issue of the magazine Casabella, 536 (1987).

² Please refer to the project website <https://www.riabitarealicia.com/>. In addition, it is possible to have a look at a concluding dossier Dini R, Della Scala V, Lanteri S (eds.) (2021) *Riabitare Alicia*. Studio di fattibilità per la riqualificazione della città antica di Salemi. Politecnico di Torino, Torino prepared for Fondazione Sicilia and a book published by Electa by the same authors, scheduled for 2022.



Figure 3. A complex scenario of transformation for the Belice territory
 Source: Image realised by Cristian Dallere, Valerio Della Scala, Roberto Dini, Silvia Lanteri.

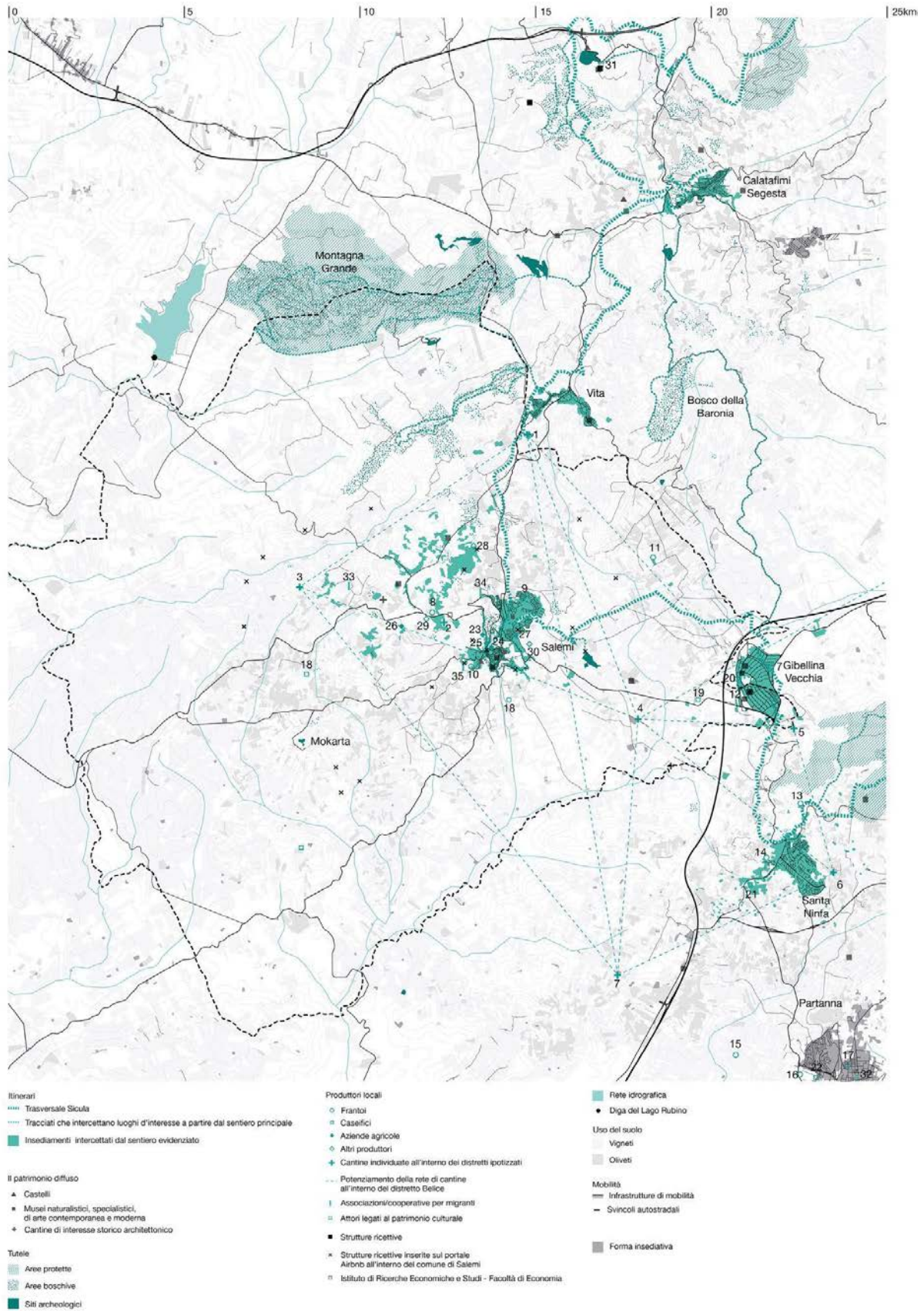


Figure 4. A new vision for the municipality
 Image realised by Cristian Dallere, Valerio Della Scala, Roberto Dini, Silvia Lanteri.

A scenario for the Belice territory whose goal is to stress some issues. First, it is intended to reconnect the inland areas with the two coasts, north and south, showing the enormous hinge potential that the valley presents thanks to a system of rather capillary and diversified connections, able to hook up valuable archaeological sites. Secondly, it includes a constellation of small towns emblematic of the earthquake and reconstruction, through which it enhances the recent history of these places, showing the wounds caused by the trauma as elements capable of triggering new opportunities for restarting, places in which even today ‘the moment of crisis, of denied trauma, becomes a space of the possible, of building a future’³ (De Rossi 2018:3). It shows a landscape composed of small streams, fields and hills, scattered with a so-called ‘diffuse heritage’, covered with vineyards and olive trees that climb the valley. This scenario could stimulate a series of policies, pushing for the creation of a districting linked to the territorial food and wine excellences, and spatial interventions that strengthen a capillary network of secondary connections in the direction of its enhancement. It is about fostering synergies between local supply chains to stimulate an awareness of the value – especially in terms of economic and cultural dimensions – that this territory has. Finally, it is intended to work on some slow mobility routes, existing to date but not widely known and valued, to encourage slow and immersive forms of tourism – different but complementary to the current predominant offer, polarized on the coasts – but also with the intention of equipping these places for the daily life of those who inhabit them, rediscovering a dimension of proximity and slow mobility.

This operation of selecting elements through representing many times the same territory, made of continuous changes in scale and themes – which again propose a continuous disassembly and reassembly of the territory that is observed, of simplification and complexification, of reasoning by fragments and by systems – allowed us to outline a design process in the perpetual redefinition of itself, which is able on the one hand to support a series of possible actions at the minute scale, and on the other hand to bring back some reflections to the general dimension that previously assumed a purely analytical declination.

Finally, it made an attempt to bring the look closer to the inter-municipal scale, highlighting the most significant elements that recurred at the various scales. Thus, a figure is outlined, composed of a section of the *Transversale Sicula* which rings a series of small towns in the Belice valley – Calatafimi, Vita, Salemi, Gibellina, Santa Ninfa – intersecting areas of cultural interest of various kinds (for example archaeological sites such as Segesta, but also protected natural areas such as the *Montagna Grande*). This route insinuates itself into the folds of the agricultural landscape, showing its own thickness made up of small streams, white roads and cultivated fields; but it also shows an inhabited landscape, in which it is possible to identify both very varied forms of habitation – in particular, three different urban systems can be recognized: the ancient city centre, the new town, and the scattered fabric arranged in a comb pattern along the secondary road system, bringing with them very distant ways of inhabiting the city and the territory, both networks of businesses, cooperatives, and local associations.

A route that clearly determines new balances and hierarchies in this territory, intercepting a series of spaces and services vital to the built-up area, showing also the ‘grey areas’ that are difficult to access or poorly served. Subsequently, the study moved in the direction of a recognition of the historic heritage’s value, aimed at focusing on an overview of its morpho-typological characteristics. At first observation, the architectural fabric reveals the layering of interventions and objects of different periods and consistencies that configure it, from buildings of excellence with great historical-architectural value to the ‘minor’ fabric that largely characterizes the urban landscape, up to the artefacts and superfetations produced during the 20th century.

The analysis of the qualitative characterization of the existing building stock that was produced had three main objectives: the first is to identify the historical-documentary-architectural value of each building or complex of buildings, through a qualitative and punctual study of the urban fabric, an operation that in this extension appears unprecedented considering Salemi; the second concerns the contribution to the morpho-typological characterization of the urban landscape, an action consisting of an evaluation of the existing heritage not only concerning the historical-architectural quality of the individual artefact, but also to its contribution in defining the overall urban image; the last objective is to construct a diagnosis of the state of preservation of the built heritage, preparatory both to providing the municipality with tools for the evaluation and ordinary management of transformations and to the design reasoning given below.

In fact, before proceeding with the phase of meta-project focuses, it was carried out an operation of identification of possible actions on the existing heritage, which allowed outlining an abacus of possible interventions on the artefacts starting from the previous considerations related to their critical recognition, both to consciously direct the choices produced within this study and to relate them to possible future interventions on the historic centre. Without going into the merits of the individual types of action – which included, among others, works of conservative restoration, renovation, completion and reconstruction – it should be emphasized that their definition brought to the surface a series of ‘elements of attention,’ that is, strategic and nodal issues for the development of a new policy of urban transformation management in a global sense.

³ Translated from Italian language by the authors.

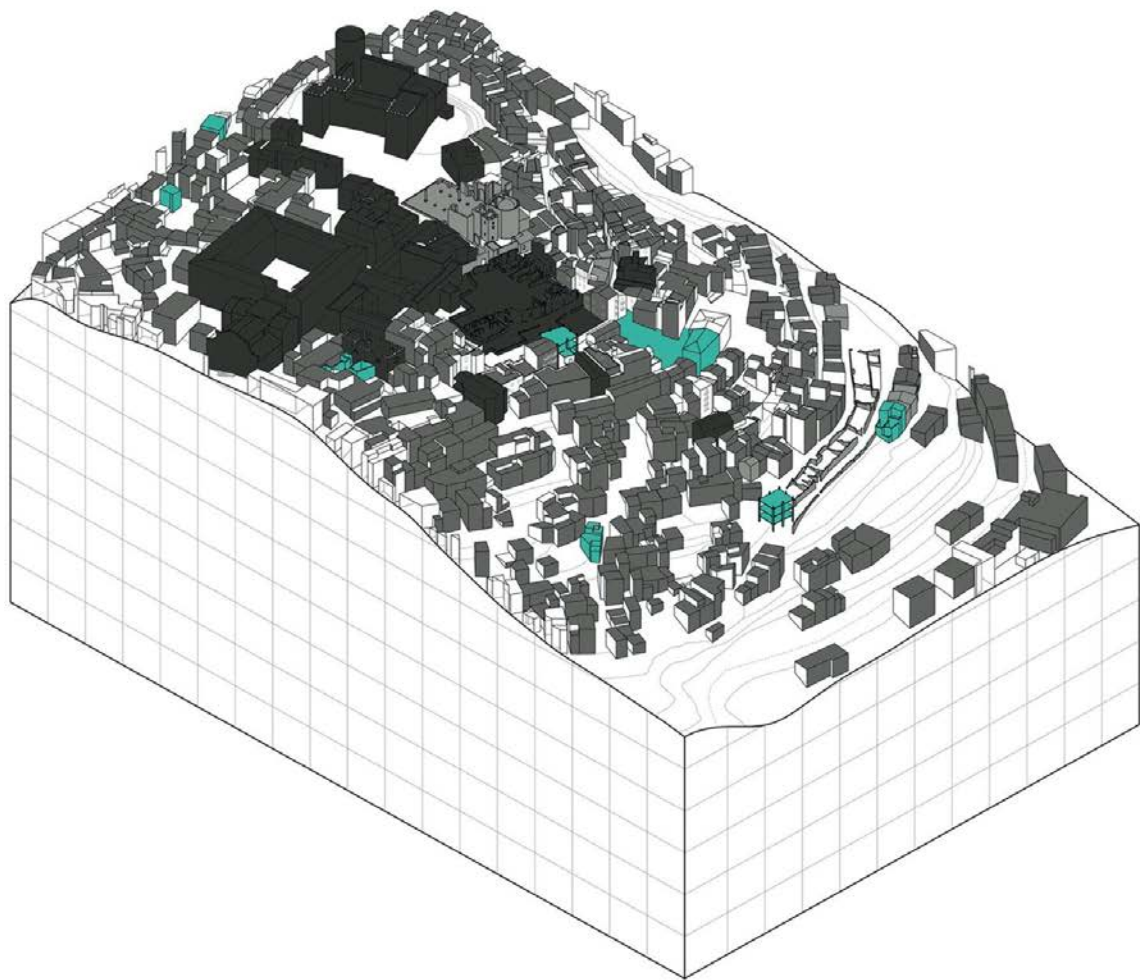


Figure 5. The analysis of the qualitative characterization of the existing building stock, to identify the historical-documentary-architectural value of each building or system of buildings
Source: Image realised by Gianluca Basile, Antonino Caridi, Valerio Della Scala, Roberto Dini, Silvia Lanteri.

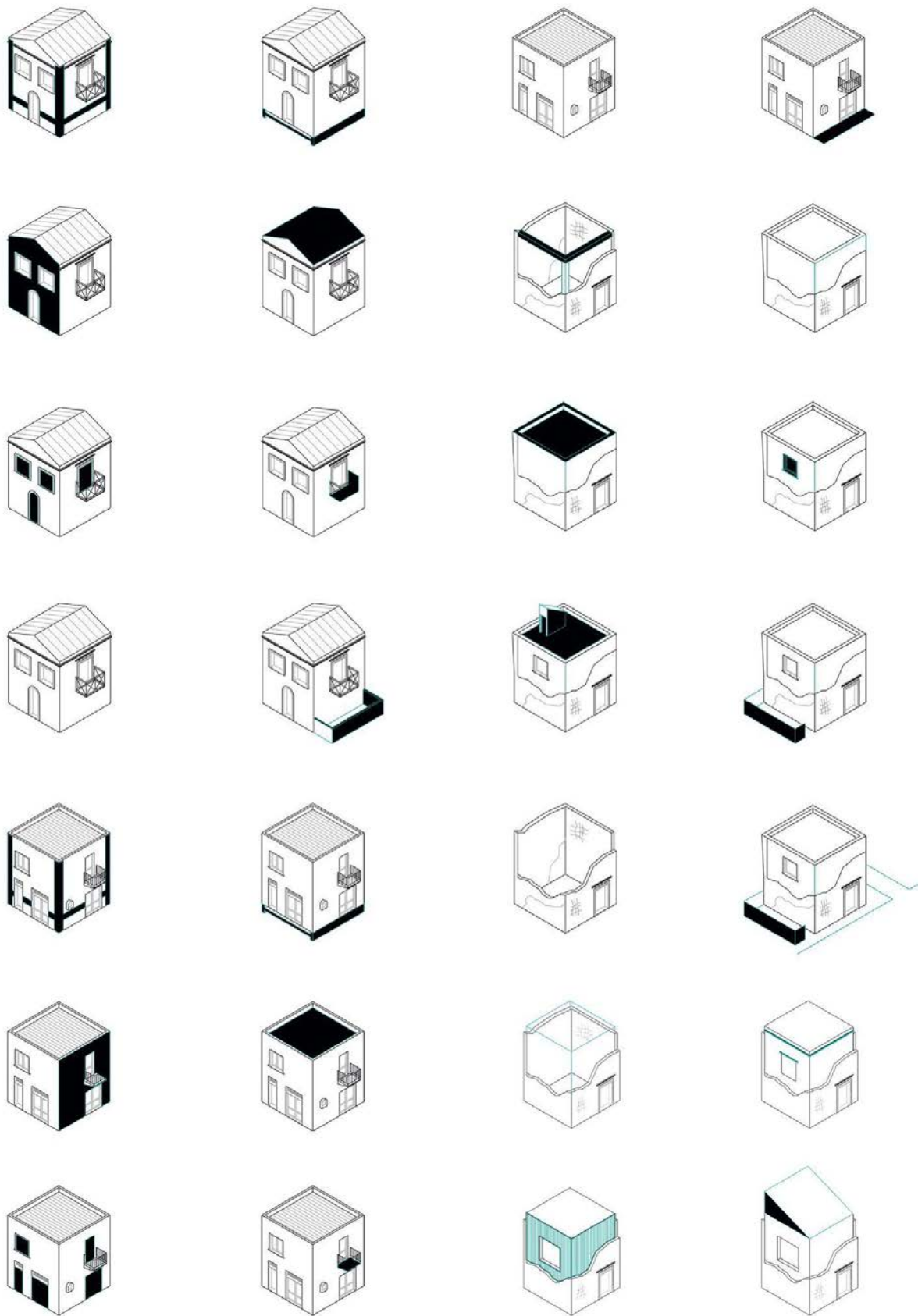


Figure 6. Abacus of the possible actions to be applied on the architectural scale
 Source: Image realised by Gianluca Basile, Antonino Caridi, Valerio Della Scala, Roberto Dini, Silvia Lanteri.

Alongside the punctual actions on individual artefacts, a series of issues at the scale of the micro-urban settlement has been focused on, exploring possible relationships between new grafts and pre-existences. These are reflections produced during the germinal stages of defining the following meta-project proposals and for this reason, they betray an inevitably partial perspective. It has concerned here above all the dialectical research that occurs in the relationship with the pre-existence, without translating them into definitive or authorial principles: a critical reinterpretation of the built heritage and context has been privileged, in which the contemporary intervention becomes a tool for interaction between old and new. In some cases, the reasoning has led toward a search for continuity with the pre-existing through forms of semantic or material reinterpretation. In others, a kind of contrastive revival is emphasized, where the completion of the original volume is connoted by a marked rupture, a constructive, material or geometric contrast with the pre-existence. In still other cases, the theme of re-inhabiting the ruin has been explored, reinterpreting the pre-existence through an ideal redesign of volumes and proportions in which, however, the difference between the new parts and the original ones is made explicit.

The project to explore possible future transformations

The final goal of the critical readings previously described was, therefore, to identify homogeneous systems within the historic centre that could function as elements of morphological re-infrastructure of the city fabric, points of particular interest for various reasons at the architectural scale. It is an operation of hierarchization of the space of the historic centre, within which to identify systems capable of behaving as elements of the main warp on which to rest and structure the main actions of intervention. In this way, spaces are delineated on a net which is a priority to initiate interventions aimed at triggering widespread redevelopment of the remaining built heritage.

Thus, several urban systems that connect the various hubs of city life were identified – squares, widenings and adjacent streets – on which numerous activities such as shops and services are concentrated, or even points of interest for cultural tourism such as museums, cultural heritage, artistic and architectural excellences.

These urban areas are connected by the roadway route that currently allows vehicular annular travel through the entire historic centre, and they are characterized by other roads that run in parallel at different elevations outlining a system of ascents to the central core of the town. These secondary routes, with their prevalent pedestrian walkability, give rise to recognizable urban districts that, thanks to the presence of a high density of publicly owned spaces, offer multiple development potentials.

A peculiar aspect of this design strategy has been to positively consider the prevailing state of poor preservation of most of these artefacts belonging to the municipality, as the availability of areas with a high degree of transformability. This may allow the creation of a volumetric restoration that is attentive not only to the total or partial restoration of volumes, but above all to the determination of new open spaces for collective or private use that will redesign the overall urban layout with the introduction of some new urban fulcrums and nodes.

With specific reference to the historic centre of Salemi, this operation of hierarchical recognition of urban systems has coagulated around the presence of some strategic areas: Piano Cascio, Misericordia, Carmine Gardens, Rabato-San Biagio. These are publicly owned areas, the outcome of the campaign of lot acquisition initiated by the municipality in the first two decades following the earthquake. The overall project correlated to that acquisition policy, in its initial configuration, envisaged a diffuse physical intervention structured on the perimeter of eleven urban subdivisions to be destined mainly for operations of public space reconnection and economic and social housing. In addition to the open space rearrangements, interventions have been carried out on seven compartments. Four portions, on the other hand, have remained unbuilt and, in some cases, became uninhabitable due to some static settlement work carried out under the supervision of the civil engineer. These unfinished sites extend according to a circular system on the perimeter of the ancient core and represent neuralgic nodes for the urban structure of the city centre.

Similar to the principle that guided the drafting of the spatial scenarios, the purpose of the project we proposed was again twofold: on the one hand to obtain a better understanding of the space (analytical-interpretive function), and on the other hand to evaluate and hypothesize possible effects that transformative processes could produce on the form of the space (strategic-perspective function). Thus bringing into the frame of observation the multiplicity of aspects that a design action would trigger, from interests to possible deviations of the process, from the financial resources at stake to forms of resistance or ostracism, to aspects related to possible cycles of use. In other words, it was a matter of identifying the most organic ‘spaces of action’ with respect to local development policies.

Even before defining transformation hypotheses, therefore, the project was used to build a dialogue with local actors, from the administrative and non-administrative spheres, based on a better and more articulated understanding of the instances in the field. The overall purpose of the study suggested that design expertise should be put to use to assist the implementation of policies and decision-making strategies rather than to produce yet another self-referential – and authorial – vision of Salem's historic centre. It is for these reasons that the morphological aspects of the proposals are the most ‘barterable’ aspect, the one that is inherently more flexible.

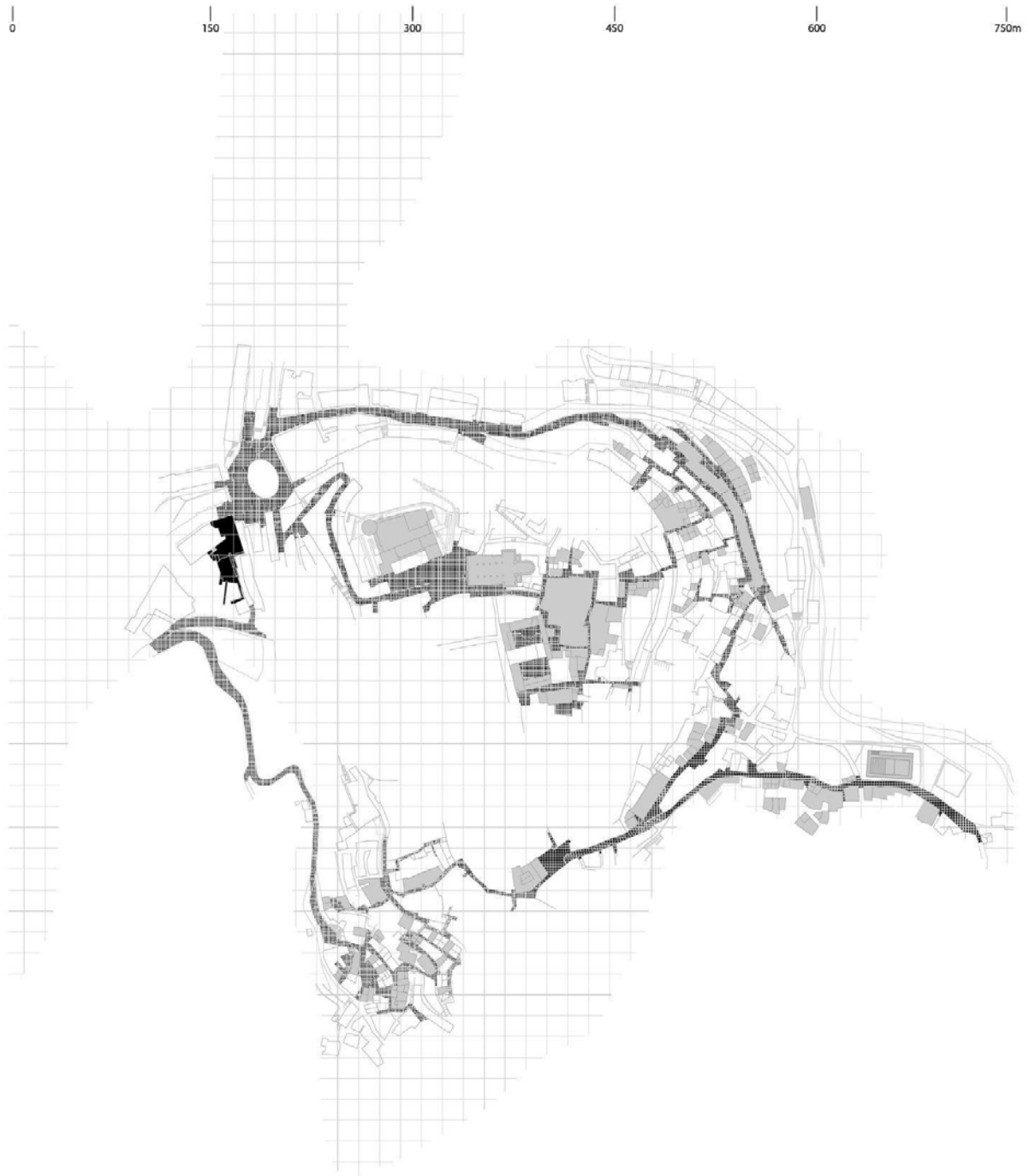


Figure 7. The nodal scheme described by the text, systems of urban hierarchization capable of behaving as elements of the main warp on which we structured the main actions of intervention

Source: Image realised by Gianluca Basile, Antonino Caridi, Valerio Della Scala, Roberto Dini, Silvia Lanteri.

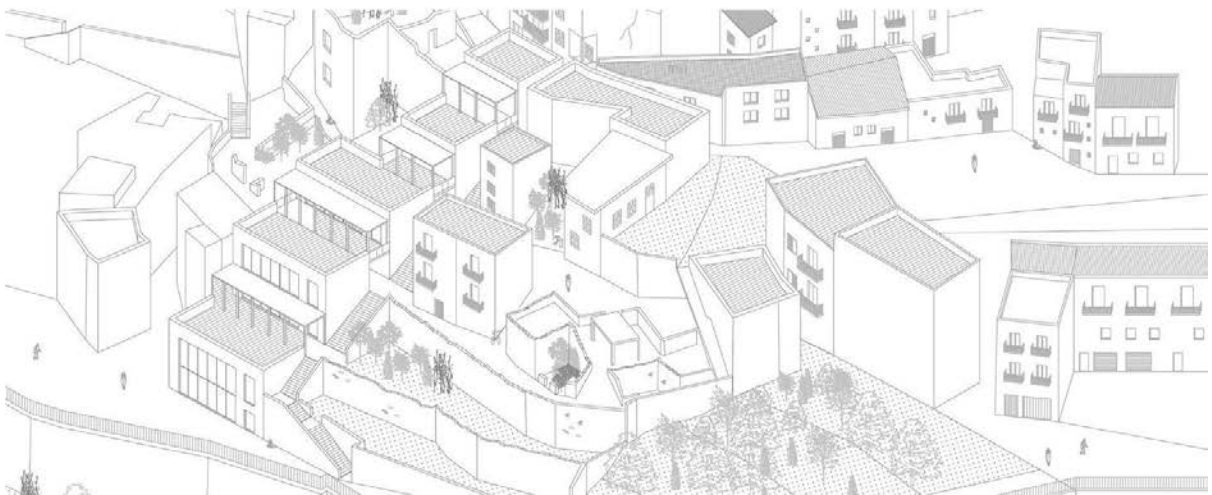


Figure 8. Some examples of the several meta-projects elaborated for the four areas. Here, from top to down, they represent Piano Cascio, Misericordia and Rabato-San Biagio

Source: Images realised by Gianluca Basile, Antonino Caridi, Valerio Della Scala, Roberto Dini, Silvia Lanteri.

The invariance between the sinks could be found in the principles that guided its definition, so far only hinted at and which can be further specified. Each meta-project is the outcome of several operations, some analytical and some projective, which can be likened to three steps: first, after defining the peculiar characters of the identified spatial samples, any prevailing vocations in terms of possible functions were highlighted, also concerning the degree of accessibility and possibility of use of the areas; second, the framework of existing constraints and instances was reconstructed, determined by regulatory preconditions, ownership regimes, the state of conservation of the site and any transformative actions already undertaken by the administration or other stakeholders; third, in parallel with the first two points, abacuses of settlement strategies were produced taking into account the peculiarities of the areas, also to optimize resources and to reduce the financial and environmental impact determined by any intervention.

The overall system thus outlined was used as a basis for producing some specific intervention hypotheses: the visualizations condensed here can be considered as a summary of the outputs produced in the final part of the research. Reiterating a concept expressed in the first paragraphs of this paper, the ultimate goal of this operation was to identify possible lines of conjunction between operations circumscribed to the historic centre and networks extended to the territorial scale.

Picking up on some of the themes expressed above, the goal was to prefiguring the spatial effects of a possible transformation of the public areas of the historic centre, based on the development of broader operations that cross both the built and open space dimensions. At the micro-urban scale, these ‘pilot projects’ were conceived as a comprehensive intervention, structured from a common matrix, but according to principles of incrementality and flexibility that aim to make possible interventions more organic and sustainable. This approach can be likened to ‘exaptation’ concept which means the production of scenarios that consider at the outset possible future deviations and spillovers⁴. Consequently, the architectural shape of the meta-projects, which is deliberately elementary, should be seen as a form of exploratory approximation, plotted to bring up issues, to identify lines of development and stimulate debate about how different levels interact, rather than to produce formally appealing or decisive proposals.

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⁴ The concept of *exaptation*, introduced by Stephen J. Gould in the evolutionary field (Gould, Vrba 1982:4–15), refers to the impossibility of controlling – or interpreting – once and for all the correspondence between form and function. In the architectural dimension, this principle suggests that deviations and emergent instances in a process should be progressively included in order to ferry them toward an effect.

