

Rehabilitation of traditional heritage and local development.

The role of the transmission of traditional construction knowledge and the empowerment of local communities in the reactivation of marginal places. A case-study approach

By

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Abstract

In relatively marginal and isolated areas, changes in socio-cultural contexts contribute to the abandonment and gradual disappearance of traditional ways of living and heritage. The lack of job opportunities, services and basic infrastructure has forced entire generations to migrate, while the remaining population decreases and ages. At the same time, these are territories marked by a symbiosis between man and nature, culturally dense and socially dynamic, where local traditions can play a key role in providing opportunities and alternatives for living.

NGOs often play an important mediating and facilitating role in these contexts, supporting through culturally and technically appropriate heritage rehabilitations, often through the activation of community processes, the survival of local populations and their traditions, counteracting standardisation and cultural homogenisation. Ten international associations and foundations (from North and West Africa, South-East Asia, Latin America and Southern Europe) were invited to take part in the four seminars series “Rehabilitation of traditional heritage and local development – RTHLD”, which took place online and in-presence between 2019 and 2022. The documentation collected during the conferences, round tables and during the writing of the proceedings (Bocci et al., in print), was supplemented through a systematic review of the literature available in publications, websites and social networks, and through interviews.

This horizontal and transversal analysis, summarised in Bocci (2022), was combined with field research on one of the case studies, Fundación Altiplano, which has been engaged for more than twenty years in rehabilitation work in the villages of the Arica and Parinacota Highlands (Chile). The research involved participatory observation of the different activities carried out by the foundation, focusing on construction sites, and interviews with the foundation members. In order to understand the socio-cultural context of reference, unstructured interviews were also carried out with some of the inhabitants of the communities who decided to inhabit and take care of their territories and villages.

The multi-disciplinary and multi-criteria analysis combined the dense description made possible by the ethnographic analysis on the field with a broader vision of the ten case studies, which allowed a comparison of approaches and dynamics.

The comparative analysis highlighted the strong relationship between the success of external actors in taking root in the local context and the strengthening of communities, as well as the consolidation of their practices over time. The greatest opportunities for economic, social and cultural development were identified in contexts where a holistic view was adopted in caring for the community and their cultural landscape. Strengthening the role of artisans and local inhabitants also proved to be crucial. The study showed that caring for a living heritage and its community implies a sensitivity to the past, but also an updating to respond to present and future needs, through creative reinterpretation and reactivation of local heritage (Asquith, Vellinga 2006).