

A Community Cohousing in Roccaporena

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## 9. A Community Cohousing in Roccaporena

by Silvia Cafora

Among the rocky and mountainous reliefs of the Valnerina mountain community, in the municipality of Cascia, the creation of a community cohousing project in Roccaporena has enabled the emergence of new local and trans-local synergies.

Here, two important needs (among others) converge: the need to regenerate and re-functionalise disused and abandoned buildings in the hamlet of Roccaporena and the need to find accessible spaces for artistic and cultural creation, which, at a national level, are cut off by inequalities and exclusionary dynamics, especially in urban centres.

The *Rockability*<sup>1</sup> project has activated a community cohousing project, which has enabled the creation of new ecosystems and triggered new biotopes (Gielen 2018)<sup>2</sup>. A small village within the territories of the Inner Areas has become a laboratory for social innovation on the margins, though it is not marginal, where communities of minors and adults, tourists and artists, can meet (Carrosio and Osti 2017). The invited artists, cultural innovators, and their respective networks have rebalanced the biotope by replacing what had been a local absence of an intentional and willing community, thereby transforming abandoned buildings through innovative cultural visions. Tենneggi has argued that, in order to activate the development of a territory, a cultural vision and the creation of a place's own narrative are necessary so the re-signification of the places themselves arises socially and has a pedagogical and intimately educational function (Tենneggi 2018).

<sup>1</sup> The *Rockability* project, Pathways for a Community in Movement, reflective and generative in the places of the possible; it is located in Roccaporena in the municipality of Cascia in the region of Umbria. It aims to promote an active space for relations and action so as to encourage and implement a programme of transformation and regeneration of the area and to contribute to the development of the territory, beginning with its elementary identity. It promotes social, local, and territorial regeneration projects.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 2, *Cultural Policies for the Commons, by the Commons, Including Small, Informal Realities in EU Programmes*, in this edition.

The spaces of Roccaporena welcome artists who develop their work creatively to set up new models of reception and links between communities. Thus, the community cohousing has become a container for an unprecedented habitat in a renewed local and trans-local community. The local inhabitants are stimulated while a sense of affection and affiliation to the place is established in the new allochthonous inhabitants. This union has been able to generate social and cultural vitality while producing new forms of ecological and economic sustainability and rebalancing institutional voids.

These fragilities can be overcome to create an incentive that counteracts polarisation, i.e., those territorial phenomena that lead to depopulation and the abandonment of fragile areas, leaving local populations impoverished and without public infrastructure, as well as the polarisation of social cultural, and real estate resources. How can all this happen? And how can these projects take root without becoming a temporary fixture?

### **A Community Cohousing in Roccaporena: A Device for Creating a Lively Habitat**

It may be useful to start with some definitions to understand the *Rockability* project and to recount the actions, as they were implemented, imagined, or studied, whose purpose was to stimulate the commons as an ecosystem for culture.

The analyses proposed here are the sum of scientific doctoral research on the themes of collaborative dwelling, cohousing, and practices of participant observation or direct participation in certain phases of the *Rockability* project. This variety of approaches allows for a more precise, analytical, and in-depth account of the various identities of the project: community cohousing as composed of spatial, socio-cultural, and economic-management facets.

#### *What is cohousing and what is community cohousing?*

It is now generally accepted that cohousing originated in Denmark in the 1970s under the name *bofælleskab*, which means ‘living community’, and from there spread to Europe, North America, Oceania, and Japan (Gresleri 2015). The term ‘cohousing’ is used to define housing models with large common spaces (covered and uncovered) for collective use and sharing. In addition to being based on econom-

ic and functional coexistence, a cohousing project is generally also based on ideological principles, shared values, and the desire to create new forms of social aggregation. We can therefore say that it is a form of collaborative housing in which tenants actively participate in the design, construction, maintenance, and management of their neighbourhood. Active participation implies a meticulous organisation of the residents' management processes and triggers social responsibility along with awareness and new forms of sustainability (economic, social, and environmental).

Although it is a term used to formally define models of residential architecture, the value and organisational system from which it is composed allows for different declensions. The cardinal element, on which cohousing is based, as suggested by the Danish word *bofælleskab*, is the community, understood as an enabling, collective, and participatory device that permits and pursues transformative processes of local development (Vestbro 2015).

Community cohousing is also a device that, in addition to putting into practice a residential model shared by a mix of inhabitants, creates a lively habitat characterised by spaces for meeting and mutual learning and in the service of the empowerment of all actors involved. It also offers economic models for accessing spaces and models of democratic governance.

The Roccaporena community cohousing created a highly heterogeneous community made up of care leavers<sup>3</sup>, minors from socio-educational communities in the Umbria region, artists, entertainment operators, excursionists, environmental educators, social and digital innovators, and active citizenship associations, who lived in the spaces at different times. Within the cohousing, minors lived temporarily with guardians of various regional and experiential backgrounds, with stays lasting about a week. Residential cohousing, on the other hand, provided medium- and long-term accommodation for care leavers. Care leavers live there in conditions of autonomy and benefit from trainings that envisage a shift from a deterministic educational model to one which is open to the natural community of care (the context, the location, the community), and where chance and unpredictability also become a resource.

The users' different lengths of stay in cohousing spaces can pro-

<sup>3</sup> Care leavers are the young adults who have just come out of the care communities. They can decide to stay for a few months or years in a cohousing – a protected but autonomous space.

duce new uses for the town, new supply chains for the territory, and new trans-territorial networks.

The Roccaporena cohousing community and the *Rockability* project aim to bring together young peoples' processes of emancipation and autonomy within trajectories of territorial transformation so as to activate national cultural exchanges along with mutual recognition and empowerment between young people and the territory, which then become a resource for each other<sup>4</sup>.

*Can social and territorial fragility collaboratively create an educational cultural system and a new narrative for Roccaporena?*

The spaces of the Roccaporena cohousing are spread throughout the village. They occupy the building of a former convent for the medium and long-term residences for the young adults. The building of the former dormitory hosts temporary residences as hostel for tourists and 'shelters' for artists. The Roccaporena cohousing is rich in spaces suitable for the exchange of skills and cultural practices; there is also a theatre and some workshops along with covered and uncovered outdoor spaces. The relevance and effectiveness of diffuse spaces lies in the fact that the cohousing is not a closed community; on the contrary, it opens up to the village and the communities that pass through it, organically revealing the activities that take place and allowing 'contamination', even unexpected 'contamination', to occur.

The *Rockability* project also envisages the regeneration of its spaces as a community activity with a scope for training and education. In fact, part of the new furniture will be produced in 'self-building' workshops in which the young people and minors who live there will take part. Self-building one's own living spaces not only creates moments for learning but, as the designer and educator Enzo Mari contends, generates a sense of belonging and care for spaces and places as well as a desire to go beyond the limits of what has already been built in order to innovate again and again (Mari 2002). This, in turn, fosters feelings of affection within the allochthonous communities towards the territory of Roccaporena.

An important part of the new ecosystem is the territorial activation occurring at a macro scale as a result of the synergies between the regeneration of the village and the rehabilitation of the trail net-

<sup>4</sup> *Rockability* is a project of the Partes cooperative.

work that branches off from Roccaporena into the Valnerina. The objective is to build a district of slow and responsible tourism in the Casciano area and to make the Roccaporena cohousing a nodal point for hospitality of hikers, cyclists, and other visitors to the territory.

Of relevance to an analysis of the commons as an ecosystem for arts and culture is a careful study of the use model of the privately owned and previously disused buildings in Roccaporena – a model produced by this cohousing experiment for both social and cultural purposes. In fact, the project creates private partnership pacts as well as a mutual commitment between the parties, which mark the potential for the civic use of common goods to become a rehabilitating device for villages subject to depopulation dynamics and the cultural impoverishment of inland areas. Indeed, this use model shows how the presence of a diffuse, mixed, and culturally productive community, such as the one being progressively delineated within the *Rockability* project, can be an enabling device, an instrument that allows the emergence of transformative processes.

In Roccaporena, the activation and improvement of participatory processes at a local level passes through educational, cultural, artistic, and ecological practices. It is also amplified by the presence of human resources and skills from local, regional, and other territories at a national level. The neo-community of Roccaporena acts following a practice of co-design, which allows the contextual co-production of collective knowledge in a process of mutual empowerment. This process recognises existing local resources (explicit or tacit) and gives rise to new forms of awareness, furnishing the community of reference with a cognitive and operational infrastructure to outline new perspectives relating to their approach and to the sustainable development of territorial dynamics.

The *Rockability* project is promoted by a group of third sector and private organisations, which propose and support a multidisciplinary approach for the physical and cultural regeneration of Roccaporena. This resonates with the realities and needs of the area to form a new sympoietic ecology – as the philosopher of science Donna Haraway has outlined – that is collaborative, inclusive, innovative, and sustainable (2020).

*Rockability* is a cultural project that revitalises the territory and its networks, replacing or implementing the role of public institutions in supporting local communities and their development in the creation of trajectories towards a possible future. The project obtained Umbrian and European regional funding, which enabled its

implementation. Like many worthwhile projects, however, it was unfortunately unable to leverage policies facilitating access to credit or regulatory practices supporting process innovation. In fact, the recognition of shared values relating to the fundamental importance of culture and all its expressions as a tool for the revitalisation of territories and the creation of new forms of economic democracies is sorely lacking at a national level. With such shared values, public institutions could implement support for cultural practices as a tool for the construction of common goods – practices that are already present to varying degrees in the territories through the production of new, ad hoc, and punctual political tools and not only in the form of competition funds – thus creating a solid infrastructure of practices on a local, territorial, and national scale.

### **A Refuge for Artists**

Taking into account that culture and the arts play a key role in the development of democracy and social and spatial justice in both vibrant urban centres and fragile marginal territories, it is interesting to note the following combination of factors in Roccaporena: on one hand, the cohousing spaces are common goods available for artistic, cultural, and therefore territorial development, and, on the other, art and culture are commons on which to base the regeneration of the cohousing spaces and the Valnerina territory.

As already described in detail above, the commons, which have the capacity to replace and/or complement the role of public institutions, support artistic creation. They achieve this by providing shared spaces, peer-to-peer networks, and models of democratic laboratories through which artists and innovators experiment with new policies for the management of collective resources.

The spaces of Roccaporena, and the model of access to and management of these, can be defined as a commons – that is, accessible spaces for sharing, exchange, and informal education. They can be described as habitats for everyday life in relation to the local landscape and social context, which take the shape of democratic and non-institutionalised spaces suitable for pandemic and post-pandemic retreat and creation: refuges for artists.

In addition to this, art and culture in Roccaporena can be considered a commons in that they provide meaning to disused or abandoned spaces in the village, transforming them into a refuge and

cohousing. Indeed, the potential within artistic disciplines to open up to the unknown in order to create the new (Amareida 2009) – together with the tools used to investigate places whether they are geographical or social territories – makes it possible to bring about new imagery and thus to preside over the process of redefining spaces, returning them renewed to the town. Art and culture become infrastructures for a new, local, and trans-local community, activating contingent potential and making them places of interest with the capacity to attract new audiences, new economies, and ecologies. In this way, the activities of artists and innovators assist public institutions in caring for and revitalising territories.

Living in an artist's refuge in a community cohousing means triggering a process of rehabilitation, finding a space for research, creating and exchanging skills, and cultivating a ground from which to propose cooperative, horizontal, and collective organisational methods aimed at the educational growth of all participants. By activating democratic laboratories and informal artistic-cultural education for the residents of the cohousing and the community, as well as creating events and festivals, artists and innovators enhance a place's attractiveness and increase the possibility for local and non-local communities to re-inhabit them at various times. They therefore set in motion and attend to local, territorial, and social fragilities – in particular local cultural impoverishment, the disused buildings in Roccaporena, and the scarcity of means for artistic production in the urban context – making them anchoring points for each other, which in turn counteracts polarisation and generates spaces of renewed socio-cultural, economic, and spatial vitality.

The great vivacity and commitment of the project are characterised by a fragile sustainability. This is because it is organised in a dis-intermediate and autonomous manner with respect to public institutions. In this context, the public is mainly present as the subject of calls for proposals at different regional scales and it is concentrated primarily on supporting the social and ecological rather than the cultural. Allowing projects to take concrete and long-term root could be a contrast to the fragilities at stake, but it is not guaranteed, it is only a possibility that hovers. Public institutions can develop tools that are better equipped to recognise these intentional communities, to support projects of great value for regional vitality and to co-design their cultural and regulatory footing.

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