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20 April 2024

Article

Culture-Based Practices as Driver of Local Development Processes in Mountain Areas—Evidence from the Alpine Region of the Province of Cuneo (Italy)

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Abstract: Over the last few decades, Alpine communities have been affected by many social, cultural, economic and demographic changes that have challenged the hegemonic development models of the 20th century and questioned the city–country cleavage. Nevertheless, the huge potential expressed by culture-based practices in low-density areas—such as the Alps—still represents an unexplored field of research. In order to progress in research in the field, through the analysis of a case study in the Italian Western Alps (Cuneo, Piedmont Region), the article proposes a new methodology of analysis and highlights that new places of cultural production are emerging and that the related culture-based practices can play the role of driver of innovative and sustainable development paths. Based on the results of the case-study analysis, the article presents a taxonomy of new practices in which the binomial culture–territory acts as a driver and explores how these processes can be transferred to similar contexts, in particular, other low-density areas.

Keywords: culture-based practices; innovative sustainable development; low-density areas; mountain areas; Alps; Alpine communities

1. Introduction

1.1. How Culture Can Revitalise Mountain Territories

Mountain communities have always defined a specific relationship with their environment, and today, they are undergoing a process of change that re-configures the use of space, questions hegemonic development models and generates new territorial projects [1–3]. This regards particularly the Alps, where Alpine culture in general and the cultural heritage in particular are re-interpreted as avant-garde, and new territorial images and descriptions of the territories and local identities are emerging. For example, as sustained by Debarbieux [4] (p. 47), "throughout the Alps, there is an increasing number of initiatives aimed at celebrating one form or another of the cultural heritage; short marketing circuits have been set up for local products".

Other studies [5,6] affirm that the role of culture in local development processes carried on in mountain territories still represents an unexplored field of research, but one with huge potential in terms of being able to support the construction of an agenda that promotes territorial development based on cultural practices as shown by some best practices inventoried in other European territories [7].

In this sense, the article takes a practice-research-based look at mountainous areas, which are considered even weaker, especially in terms of contemporary cultural practices, following a path that has already seen significant in-depth studies in urban areas [8,9] or in other territories, as demonstrated by the 30-year experience of the case of Art Project

in Japan [10] or the work carried out on the subject in relation to the territory of Eastern Europe [11].

The combination of culture and territorial development is traditionally linked to matters that essentially concern the urban sphere, as if cultural practices and policies were first and foremost a strictly urban issue, related particularly to large metropolises. On the contrary, some reflections and studies at the international level [12–14] highlight how, even in low-density territories, including rural and mountainous areas, cultural initiatives and policies could have interesting repercussions, contributing to the redefinition of rural planning strategies. Low population density could, therefore, represent a specific resource of the territory in the definition and construction of cultural initiatives, through a sort of conceptual reversal that marks the passage from a negative vision of this element, understood as a condition of disadvantage and weakness, to a positive vision that assigns added value to it.

Several reasons are seen as supporting this conceptual overturning:

- A low population density implies a certain cultural and social rarefaction, and this paradoxically allows creativity to emerge more than in the urban environment. This consideration follows the perspective offered by anthropologist Remotti [15], regarding the matter of cultural impoverishment and creativity, which can be well applied in mountainous areas. Remotti sustains that cultural creativity "needs space within which to express itself, which is why a 'dense culture' or a strong social structure facilitates creativity less than an impoverished culture (or a weak social structure)", which is often the case in mountain communities—communities in which, in many cases, low population density is accompanied by a rarefaction of social networks and "empty spaces" within which there are actually suspensions, stoppages and interruptions [16], which allow ideas to emerge by innovating and contributing to the production of new cycles of territorialisation;

- The scarce human presence in many cases has made it possible to preserve the natural, architectural and artistic heritage so as to remain outside the dynamics of "pollution", linked to policies of the monoculture of tourism, which are essentially the result of a Fordist model of development. This sort of cultural preservation has, in some cases, become a driver of development; resources that have previously been neglected are now becoming highly attractive factors thanks to a renewed perception of their potentiality by future users [17];

- The mountain and rural environments are often located at the "margin"—not only physically but also culturally and socially—which can allow the experimentation of creative and artistic activities outside the urban cultural mainstream to be performed, while imposing themselves as cultural avant-garde. It is the condition of the "vibrancy of the margin", to quote Bonomi [18] (p. 73), where economic flows, awareness of locations and global networks intertwine and interrupt each other with strong shifts in scale;

- Low population density, while bringing a series of problems relating to the provision of services to the territory, also offers a series of attractive factors that have, over the last fifteen years, led to the displacement of creative actors that have fostered cultural change and territorial innovation [19–21].

With reference to this framework, the article focuses on mountain culture-based practices as a driver of the activation of territorial development processes in low-density areas. Through the analysis of a case study, the mountain territory of the province of Cuneo (Piedmont) in the Western Italian Alps, the article supports the theory that these practices can play a role as a container for innovative and sustainable paths and models. Starting from the review of the main scientific bibliography on the present issue and making a critical reflection on the present application of the theoretical concepts, the article proposes a new methodological approach for the analysis of the recent culture-based practices and their impact on local territories. Based on the results of the case-study analysis, the article highlights valid points on this issue by elaborating a taxonomy referred to the culture-based

practices and their relation with Western Italian Alps, which also finds confirmation in different mountain contexts abroad, and by identifying new places of cultural production, going beyond its traditional conceptualization. Based on the analysis and discussion, the article aims to make progress on the issue by offering a new methodological analysis and approach that could also be applied in other similar mountain territories in order to support the implementation of local development processes.

1.2. Alpine Culture: Theoretical Background

For centuries, the Alps have been a place of exchange, contact, social production and artistic expression. Seen for a long time as isolated from the elites of the plains, in actual fact, they entertain both horizontal (mountain–mountain) relations, on either side of passes and hills, and vertical (mountain–plane) relations, with the countryside and cities. In the last century, when there were still those in academia who maintained that they were ahistorical in that they were outside the great movements of history, the mountains and the Italian Alps in particular suffered a laceration; the economic boom represented a historical antecedent that had never been experienced before. Although allochthonous images have portrayed the mountains as a place for the use and consumption of the city for centuries, it was with the 20th century depopulation that a fracture occurred within Alpine culture, because with the emigration of people to the valley, the social glue, the true driver of cultural exchange, was lost. The exceptional as opposed to the ordinary has long prompted the belief that Alpine culture is destined to disappear, displaced by modern employment in entirely new sectors (see tourism and total ski resorts) and the acquisition of lifestyles homologated to the city.

Today, however, examples from research over the last decade [22–24] have proven the opposite. The broadening of the concept of heritage, once understood as only high and authorial artistic production [25], has contributed significantly to this reversal. Over the last 50 years, the term has expanded both in scholarly debate and in bottom-up practices, placing the tangible and intangible cultural productions of the popular classes alongside elite productions. In 1972, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) drew up the "Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage", in which the knowledge, and tangible and intangible evidence of cultures from all parts of the world were recognised as universal heritage, in order to safeguard their social, cultural, symbolic and economic values. This was later expanded by two other conventions, drafted in 2003 and 2005: the "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage" and the "Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions".

The 2003 Convention in particular includes intangible components such as traditional knowledge of things, places, the environment and nature. Indeed, intangible cultural heritage refers to the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and know-how, as well as the use of tools, objects, artefacts and associated cultural spaces, that communities, groups and individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage [26]. This new definition, which is not without social, political and cultural implications, opened up a fruitful global debate in the social sciences on the practices of transmission, management, valorisation and preservation [27–30] within so-called heritage communities (or communities of practice) [31]. Fitted into this framework, the "Declaration on Population and Culture" of the Alpine Convention, adopted during the 9th Alpine Conference in 2006, acknowledges the climate related to heritagisation in the Alpine communities in a period of cultural and social changes in the Alps [32].

While in the past the main aim of the heritagisation of tangible and intangible aspects of rural communities was to rescue cultural expressions from oblivion and resulted in numerous "emergency" interventions, the perspective that looks at heritage as a resource has developed over time [33,34]. In this perspective, heritage is used and consumed sensibly by the stakeholders involved, and cultural and economic interests intersect without one excluding the other. This use of heritage can be considered innovative, if innovation is

understood as the introduction of something new but also the process of dissemination of a novelty in practices and space [35–37]. From this point of view, the Alps seem to be a privileged observatory due to the marginal localisation and absorption of urban models—which could be read from a perspective of "impoverishment" [15]—and the current social and cultural changes (first of all the repopulation of some hamlets and villages), which are bringing unexpected and creative phenomena.

In many parts of the Alps affected by an almost total depopulation, attention is drawn to the fact that it is precisely the new inhabitants who are rediscovering and reclaiming the local past. Often, this ownership is acquired as a result of an "emptiness" created by demographic decline [38] but also as a result of a creative approach [39], which takes place through the capitalisation and transmission of local territorial resources by their holders (Figure 1). In these contexts, both culture and cultural heritage are recognized as a resource to put in value [40] because they can contribute "to the objectives of other policy areas. For example, it supports the development of sustainable tourism, or the establishment of hubs of cultural and creative industries; it creates local employment; it facilitates social inclusion within cities or territories (e.g., migrants); it fosters territorial cohesion (e.g., local identity); and it improves quality of life (e.g., health)" [7]. Aside from the dangers of metropolisation, the following has in fact been seen relatively to such subjects: "They can also be seen as pioneers in the invention of new ways of life, new relationships with nature and mobility, and consequently as actors in new "city-country" relationships" [41] (p. 7).
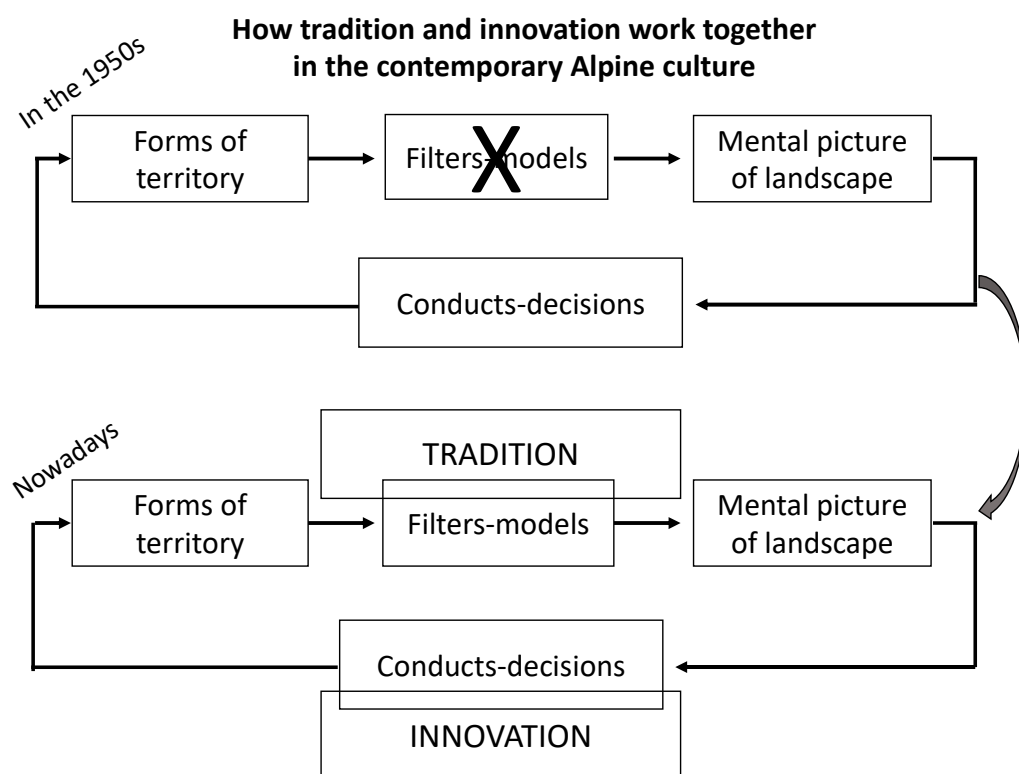
Figure 1. Cyclic relation between mental image of the landscape (representations and perceptions), and the sphere of the conducts and the decision (territorial construction) [42]. The scheme shows how, lately, filters and models of the representation of the landscape (tradition), which were neglected in the middle of the 20th century, have been innovating with new conducts and decisions that are virtuous for the territory. The scheme is based on Franzini Tibaldeo's [43] and Bertolino's studies [22].

These social dynamics demonstrate how the same conditions that have led many Alpine territories to marginalisation and depopulation could be turned into potential, enhancing competitiveness and resilience, as in other inner areas in Europe [44]. Marginalisation has allowed to preserve some natural and cultural resources, which have disappeared elsewhere (such as water, forests, biodiversity in general and eco-systemic services con-

nected to them; landscape; historical and architectural heritage; diversified know-how, and social and cultural capital). Resources that were once the basis of the traditional economy, as opposed to what happened with the conversion into the touristic model and the social and cultural changes in the last century. Nevertheless, the local communities are still the custodians of heritage and some local know-how, which have been revalorized in sustainable ways. They concern agriculture, qualitative local production, eco-friendly building techniques, local history and traditions, and all the practices and community organisations built up over the centuries, which are the result of an obstinate adaptation to historical events and to specific environmental conditions.

This new vision of mountain territories represents a propelling force for new future projects and put resilience to the test [45–48]. As stated by Bonomi [49] (p. 67) "resilience is the opposite of rigidity, you endure to move forward, not to withdraw into sadness and desperation again. You do it to open up to hope, as a conscious aspiration to a new future". This aspiration towards a re-territorialization process by enhancing the underestimated local potential is based on two factors: the objective presence of specific territorial resources (natural and cultural) and the subjective perception of external subjects and networks. In this hybridisation of elements, generated by a virtuous process that blends what it is internal (in local culture, landscape, environment, etc.) with what is external (financial and cultural resources or new physical and virtual infrastructures), cultural creativity is stimulated, territorial competitiveness is promoted and local resilience is supported, also thanks to an innovative use of the tradition and of the past, which represent the roots of the future.

As a matter of fact, other studies on cultural heritage in the Alps [50] show that what we call "tradition", while not interrupting the chain of transmission, is no longer subject to a predictable intrafamilial and vertical passage. Today's transmission is vertical but not intra-familial; horizontal; and not intergenerational but intragenerational; obliquely, i.e., it is extrafamilial and extragenerational. A multilevel and multidirectional transmission model is followed: from the elderly, holders of local knowledge, to young new inhabitants, who are willing, and often eager, to become bearers of these traditions, and then from young locals to new inhabitants (Figure 2). These new forms of transmission that are appearing on the Alpine socio-cultural scene are particularly interesting and appear to be also crucial for our topic, because the transfer/exchange of knowledge and techniques first and foremost between holders and apprentices, but also between the latter and those who commission, is a process of co-construction and concerns the re-establishment of the close relationship among know-how, intangible knowledge and the place where it is produced and consumed (be that a physical or mental space).
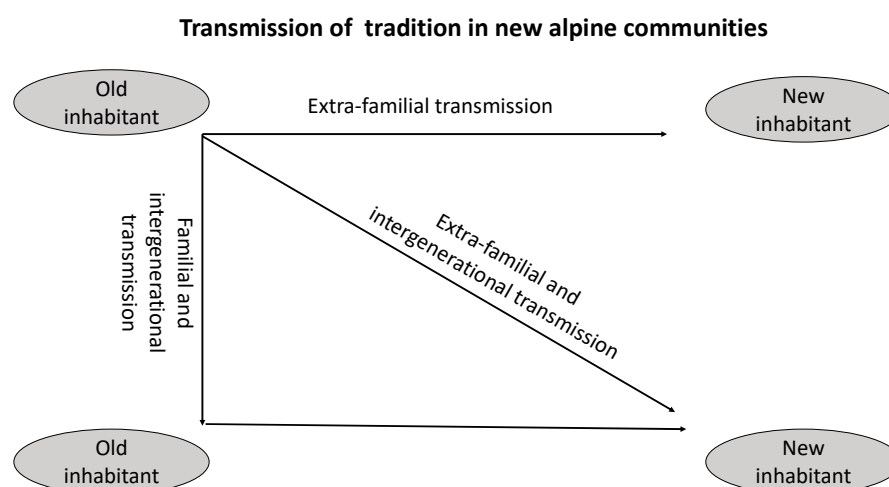

Figure 2. The representation of the multilevel transmission of the tradition in present-day Alps.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. *Contextualization of the Case Study: The Alpine Territory of the Province of Cuneo*

The province of Cuneo covers an area of 6894.94 square kilometres and is made up of 250 municipalities with 589,108 inhabitants. The high number of municipalities places the province in second place in Italy, among the most administratively articulate, and in third place in terms of territorial extension. The territory consists of mountains (50.8%)—where mountains are considered, by Italian Law, all the territories that are 600 m above sea level [51]—hills (26.6%) and plain/high plateaus (22.6%). In our research study, we used the "functional definition" of mountain given by Fondazione Montagne Italia [52], so we considered the totality of the municipalities in mountainous territories or that have a share of mountain territory and in which Unioni Montane (Mountain Unions)—a local body made of different municipalities and with associated functions delegated by the municipalities themselves—work. The mountain area in particular plays a particular role in local dynamics. This area can be represented as a range of transverse valleys converging on the plain. These valleys are part of the Cottian Alps, the Maritime Alps and the Ligurian Alps, as far as the intersection with the Ligurian Apennines (Figure 3).
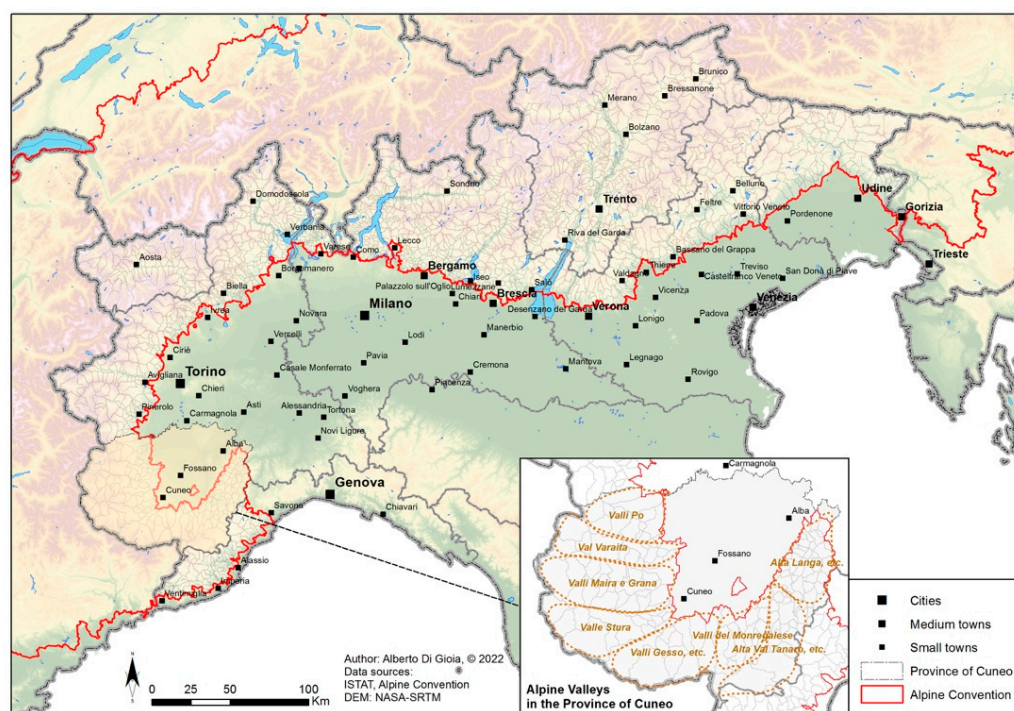

Figure 3. Localisation of the area of the case study in the Alps.

The landscapes and natural environments of the province of Cuneo, especially those in the mountains and river valleys, have always been highly recognisable and important features of the territory, as well as objects of attention in terms of protection and preservation. There are nature parks of regional importance, nature parks of local importance, special protection areas and sites of community interest [53].

In this context, the role of urban centres appears crucial. The towns and cities present in the foothill link the lowland and mountain areas and meet the primary needs of those who live in the valleys, thanks to a wide range of services offered, while tourists can find a good system of accommodations and services. The territorial dynamics are largely and historically related to the following aspects, though some countertrends are emerging [52,54,55]:

- Depopulation and the ageing of the population, especially in weak inland areas: In this respect, some interesting countertrend indications that highlight traces of movement of people towards the mountains are beginning to emerge, even if they are not reported by statistics (Table 1);

- The abandonment of farming in favour of other activities: shepherding, livestock breeding and farming are no longer carried out by young native mountain dwellers, who prefer to work in other sectors, often related to tourism, but always experimenting with new forms of tourism as an alternative to traditional ski tourism;
- The control of urbanisation by small and medium-sized urban communities, including those with relatively modest demographic thresholds, which nonetheless act as central locations with respect to the surrounding area, occupying a higher hierarchical level than many towns outside the Alps;
- The process of loss of services for the population, which have always been lacking in inner Alpine areas, but also experimentation with new forms of supply, especially in marginal inner areas, from remote medical care to remote education to the dial-a-ride bus.

Table 1. Population dynamics (1911–2011) in Cuneo mountain area split into altimetric zones. Data source: ISTAT.

	1911	**1961**	**2001**	**2011**
High valleys	24,432	11,775	5808	5415
Middle valleys	76,143	39,105	22,040	21,310
Low valleys	77,673	49,710	43,775	45,764
Total of the Cuneo mountain area	178,248	100,590	71,623	72,489

2.2. Research Methodology

Contemporary Alpine culture is the culture of responsibility, through a synchronic comparison with other spheres of life and a diachronic comparison with its own past. It is the culture of the re-use of techniques, technologies and materials, and of models of sociability, adapted to suit contemporary needs. However, contemporary Alpine culture is also the ability to interpret and communicate the specificity of the mountain areas using new artistic instruments and expressions, especially with the contamination of the city, with which, however, a new relationship is being defined (e.g., models that can be transferred from mountain to city and not only vice versa). If this autonomy is recognised, then festivals, photography exhibitions, video reviews, performing arts, storytelling, artistic craftsmanship, art galleries and ateliers have their own mountain specificity, even if they speak a language (a shared code) common to the art forms of the city, whether their theme is local or global.

The use of characteristic mountain spaces to host artistic expressions is distinguished by its uniqueness; staging theatrical performances in buildings and fortifications determines a contemporary use and re-functionalisation that adds value to the site, while opening a mountain hut to literary presentations, concerts and exhibitions represents the positive contamination of a place.

Lastly, if we accept that creativity lies in openness, in meeting and in the ability to incorporate external contributions—and sometimes even in the impact among different cultures—then we can understand how, in order to identify contemporary Alpine culture, we must move as far away from the search for the authentic as possible, accepting that contamination moves in two directions and transforms subjects, elements and spaces that meet. In other words, contemporary Alpine culture is the meeting place of ethnoscapes (movements of people) and ideascapes (movements of ideas) [56], which are embedded in vaster flows but which find here the possibility of expression through cultural and social models.

In this sense, in order to understand how contemporary Alpine culture acts as a driver of the initiation of development processes, we proceeded with a methodological investigation based on quantitative and qualitative analyses of the planning of cultural practices in the territory examined (Figure 4).
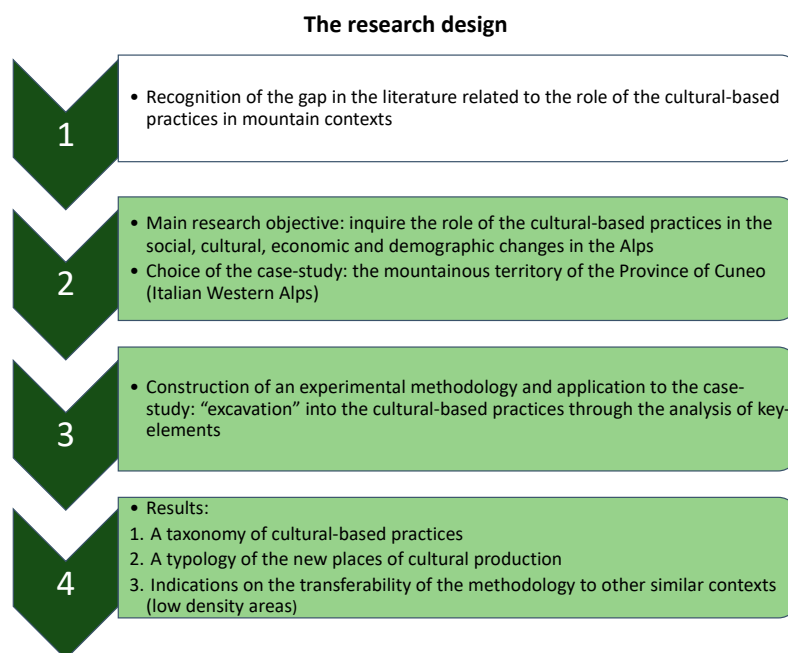
The research design

1	• Recognition of the gap in the literature related to the role of the cultural-based practices in mountain contexts
2	• Main research objective: inquire the role of the cultural-based practices in the social, cultural, economic and demographic changes in the Alps • Choice of the case-study: the mountainous territory of the Province of Cuneo (Italian Western Alps)
3	• Construction of an experimental methodology and application to the case-study: "excavation" into the cultural-based practices through the analysis of key-elements
4	• Results: 1. A taxonomy of cultural-based practices 2. A typology of the new places of cultural production 3. Indications on the transferability of the methodology to other similar contexts (low density areas)

Figure 4. Scheme of the steps of the research study.

The analysis was based on secondary sources, and local projects were identified on the basis of a desk review of the decade 2005–2015 [57]. The analysis focused on some key elements (Table 2) considered strategic in the implementation of recent cultural practices. For the purpose of a comparison, each culture-based practice was described using a format including: the institutional territory involved in the project; the goal and the form of valorisation of the Alpine contemporary culture; the tangible and intangible territorial resources activated; the result achieved; the budget used; and the type of promoters. The format (Table 2), for its level of generality and its similarity to others already developed at the European level [7], is transferrable to other rural or mountain contexts in which culture-based practices can be found.

Table 2. Item questions during the analysis of the planning of cultural practices in the Alpine territories of the province of Cuneo.

Key Elements	Project Analysed
Institutional territory involved in the project	Physical–geographic area involved
Goals and forms of valorisation	Elements towards which the proposed project aims, their implementation and valorisation, and how cultural heritage is re-interpreted
Territorial resources activated (tangible and intangible)	For example, know-how, historical-architectural assets (castles, fortresses, refuges, etc.), environmental assets (meadows, forests, protected areas, etc.), tradition and local language, shepherding and transhumance routes, etc.
Results achieved	For example, the creation of local and supra-local networks among players, networking of younger human capital, recovery of historical artefacts, etc.
Budget	Economic consistency of the project
Promoters	For example: municipalities, unions of municipalities, province, region, etc.

The methodology suggests to draw on work made up of "excavations" within local planning in relation to emerging cultural practices with the aim of investigating the "implicit project" of territorial development [58]. For the case study in question, the results of this "excavation" made it possible to recognise an "Alpine creative milieu" which is specific to the mountain territories, where "culture and art, next to economic or political decisions, play an important role concerning the regional, transboundary development. [. . .] The cultural events are as multifaceted as the actors which influence arts and culture in the border region. This also means that culture and creativity are processes which are not limited to the big urban areas. Rural and alpine regions have also a specific potential to create" [59] (p. 368). Through this, local actors create new networks at the local level, sometimes reaching as far as the global level.

Using the analysis methodology, three types of local planning activated on the territory were identified:

- *Events and projects*: projects realised through national and international public calls for proposals that activate cultural resources in synergy with a combination of local resources. They cover different cultural forms (theatre, music, literature, etc.) and constitute a cultural product that attracts visitors and meets the needs of contemporary consumers with positive effects on different sectors of the local economy;
- *Activities carried out by eco-museums*: projects capable of connecting past, present and future and of contributing to territorial development through valorisation paths that go beyond a purely aesthetic tradition;
- *Entrepreneurial activities in the arts and crafts sector*: projects that refer to know-how, to the spoken tradition of ancient crafts and to the transmission of "artisan excellence", introducing innovation and new solutions. Art and crafts stand out, especially in rural areas, as a "player in the transmission of intangible cultural heritage" [12].

3. Results

The analysis resulted in a series of qualitative–quantitative data and the relative impacts on the territory examined, ranging from the geographical distribution of projects to the sectors of intervention, the stakeholders involved and the critical issues that emerged. In particular, the following emerged:

- A good ability to innovate territorial practices around contemporary Alpine culture that trigger the construction of networks and enter into relations with the local community, especially in the inner western mountains of the province, while greater difficulty was found in the eastern area of the Cuneo mountains with regard to the development of cultural heritage;
- A predominance, within the "events and projects" category, of certain artistic forms and languages: music, especially; cinema and museography; then, contemporary art; again, to a lesser extent, theatre, dance and literature; and finally, crafts, figurative arts and photography (Figure 5). Music seems to convey contemporary Alpine culture to a greater extent, as it uses a language that is often very close to young people. It succeeds in importing new ideas, mixing what comes from urban areas with a very strong and specific tradition. All this generates forms of sharing and spaces of territorial aggregation using open spaces;
- A substantially balanced distribution of eco-museums (Table 3), highlighting a certain general tendency to recognise the value of the memory of the local community and an interest in keeping local tradition alive without locking it away in conventional museums. The initiatives promoted showed precisely that the eco-museums do not close off knowledge in a fixed manner but open it up to the territory through networks of projects that involve tourists but also the local community on a permanent basis;

- A discrete distribution over the territory of artisan excellence (Table 4) that emphasises how the long-term relationship with the territory is considered an important element for the territory itself; over a certain period of time, often spanning entire generations, the master craftsman is able to weld affective, cultural and social ties through his workshop (atelier, studio, laboratory, etc.) with the places, people and institutions of a certain territory. On the basis of these ties, the craftsman consolidates the territorial humus within which they develops their art;
- A good ability to design proposals from the territory, capable of intercepting local networks and hooking up supra-local networks, and to develop cultural, historical–architectural, natural and landscape heritage elements in innovative ways;
- An interesting construction of links with different targets:
    1. Young people experimenting with cultural forms by fostering new ideas;
    2. Old and new inhabitants who use culture as a form of inclusion;
    3. Other territories to build cultural bridges;
    4. Local players to create networks.
- An important presence of public bodies, which often assume a pivotal role in initiatives, also thanks to the financial resources made available. However, the issue of funding for culture remains a weak factor for these territories. Funding is often tied to temporary events, making it difficult to work on cultural activities on a permanent basis. Moreover, the shortage of funds also limits the possibility of stable cultural projects and organisations within these same territories. Especially in rural–mountainous areas, there is still the idea that culture is "the concern of a minority. These prejudices become obstacles when it comes to demonstrate the pertinence and cost-effectiveness of investing public or private funds to support these organisations" [60] (p. 5).

Table 3. Eco-museums and their position in the Alpine territories of the Province of Cuneo.

Localization (Mountain Union—MU)	Eco-Museums
MU Monte Regale	0
MU Mondolè	Ecomuseum of Marble
MU Valli Moregalesi	0
MU Valle Varaita	0
MU Valle Stura	Ecomuseum of Herding
MU Alta Langa	Ecomuseum of Terraces and Vineyards
MU Valle Maira	Ecomuseum of High Maira Valley
MU Valle Grana	Ecomuseum of Castelmagno
MU Mongia, Civetta, Langa Cebana Val Bormida	0
MU Alpi Marittime	0
MU Alpi del Mare	Ecomusuem of Rye and Ecomuseum of Carthusians
Mu Monviso	0
MU Barge Bagnolo	0
MU Alta Val Tanaro	0

Table 4. Number and position of artisan excellences identified in the Alpine territories of the province of Cuneo.

Localization (Mountain Union—MU)	Number of Artisan Excellences
MU Monte Regale	0
MU Mondolè	11
MU Valli Moregalesi	10
MU Valle Varaita	47
MU Valle Stura	13
MU Alta Langa	1
MU Valle Maira	28
MU Valle Grana	25
MU Mongia, Civetta, Langa Cebana Val Bormida	9
MU Alpi Marittime	15
MU Alpi del Mare	13
Mu Monviso	24
MU Barge Bagnolo	24
MU Alta Val Tanaro	8
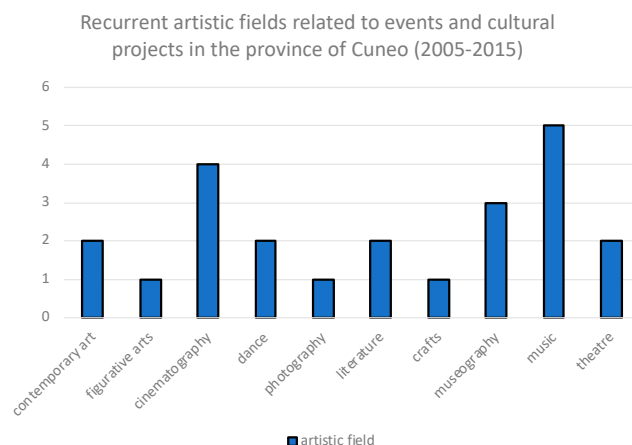
Figure 5. Recurrence of the artistic fields in the events and cultural projects analysed in the study.

4. Discussion

Starting from the results of the case study analysed and considering the theoretical issues drafted in Section 1.1, an interpretative framework on the topic was built in order to open up some general reflections, which can find confirmation in other mountain territories affected by marginalization and low population density, where different "empty spaces" can be found. If we follow the approach described in Section 1.1, the consideration of the culture-based practices as a driver of local development processes finds empirical evidence in the project vision built from the activation of the resources of the "milieu locale" [61]. In this case, culture in territories "in crisis" [62] works and acts as a lever for innovation within an effective "mixité" of territorial valorisation. For this reason, the case study becomes an "exceptional normal" narrative [63,64] from which to bring out some aspects normally invisible due to a general lack of analysis, to reveal limitations, criticalities and potentialities, shedding new light on the starting theories. The case study thus represents the possibility of connecting in logical terms to other situations and general considerations regardless of its typical representativeness. By assuming this approach, the discussion aims to define what we argue in paragraphs 1.1. and 1.2 by categorising the recent social

phenomena related to the culture-based practices into an interpretative framework, which we believe could be useful for other studies in the field. In the interpretative framework, we firstly propose a taxonomy of the culture-based practices that work as a driver of the processes of local development and that could have different impacts within the local communities. In the taxonomy, some examples of culture-based practices in Europe and in Italy support the discussion, reinforce the validity of the elements individuated and underline the transferability of the interpretations proposed. Then, we illustrate a typology of the places in which these culture-based practices are performed. This typology is related to the emerging issue that spaces of historical, architectural and environmental heritage are revisited through new symbolic values and possible ways of use in combination with an innovative interpretation of the territory. This interpretation capitalises on that heritage that is both the outcome and the product of culture itself and also assumes a role of "co-protagonist" in the definition of a living and dense context of cultural production. As a consequence, the valorisation of cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, becomes a form of local development [65] entangled with the regeneration of mountain territories.

4.1. A Taxonomy of Culture-Based Practices for the Implementation of Local Development

The taxonomy is divided into the following possible categories of projects seen in their action–impact on the territory:

- Projects that make cultural renewal the basis for activating the territory's "panier de bien" [66], consisting of a mix of irreplaceable and specific resources, which, when put together, define a territorial quality that generates innovative economic and social processes: These are projects that start from cultural events that can be considered "new" or "invented", arise from local needs and become a driving force for the re-semanticisation of the site and local culture, in turn becoming new heritage elements. Festivals, in particular, now stand at the intersection of culture and economy, laying the foundations for the revitalisation of entire territories and participating in processes of social, cultural and economic regeneration. "Cultural festivals are also increasingly regarded by arts policy maker as important to the incubation and sustenance of vernacular arts industries-" [67]. With these cultural events, the very perception of cultural life in rural areas has changed [68] (p. 24) and they are "simultaneously 'cultural' and 'economic' phenomena" [67]. An example is the 30-year old festival of *Les Vieilles Charrues*, held annually in Carhaix, Finistère (Brittany, France). The festival offers a series of concerts over four days in July. The idea is a forerunner of what festivals have demonstrated in recent years in rural contexts: they offer the public an alternative to the cultural and artistic monopoly of the metropolis. *Les Vieilles Charrues* has indeed proven that it is possible to reduce territorial inequalities in access to culture by participating in cultural decentralisation. However, the homonymous association that runs the festival has also positioned itself as a "community activator". In addition to the many volunteers involved during the festival itself, the current organisation employs twelve salaried people throughout the year and more than 500 temporary employees during the months before and after the festival dates. This means that the impacts on the local economy are very important and varied. Territorial anchorage lies not only in the bottom-up strategy with which it was created but also in the creation of a fair economy model aimed at the integration of social players in the area, with 80% of the festival's suppliers coming from Brittany. Within this framework, a social laundry was set up to encourage the washing of reusable items during major events (*La laverie Eco Charrues*), along with a record label (*Label Charrues*) that promotes the region's young artists. In terms of funding for local culture, it is worth mentioning the support for the local bilingual high school (French–Breton), the funding for the *Espace Glenour* theatre and cinema, and the creation of the association for the promotion of Breton heritage, *Les Mémoires du Kreiz Breizh*. Over the years, the festival has acquired a key role, becoming a driving force in local dynamics by becoming an advocate of

development projects that generate employment and are synonymous with the future for young Central Bretons;

- Projects in which the cultural initiative is used to help the emergence of a latent potential for development and in which art, understood in its multiple forms, "becomes public": In other words, artistic and cultural projects become a space for debate, a meeting place "where different interests of different players, problems that refer to the local context, can converge" [69] and where the territorial identities that have been weakened by time can be strengthened and become an opportunity for community growth/re-construction. At the centre of these practices, there are unprecedented exhibitions by local artists, literary trails or traditional festivals. As Decandia [70] (p. 129) states about the "book tour" in the rural and mountainous areas of Gallura—an event conceived by some new inhabitants and returnees with the aims to present books on the ancient, abandoned shepherds' paths—these projects reveal themselves as "an opportunity to create moments of convivial exchange from which to form the basis of relationships, new embryos of community", so projects that set in motion processes of reconfiguration of territorial identity, overcome the lacerations with the past and assign new significance to these places—new significance that favours the construction of innovative forms of local development based, for example, on that rural hospitality that fits into the natural and cultural system of places, becoming the narrating voice of a cultural heritage that does not become folklore (e.g., www.agriturismolacerra.it, accessed on 14 October 2022). In this sense, "cultural heritage is clearly an essential resource used to shape a sense of place and identities in rural place-making and potentially, tourism development" [71] (p. 14). These are processes triggered by "bottom-up approaches which focus on culture, territory, local diversity and the optimization of local resources. Territorial approaches seek to enhance the particular strengths of a rural locality by developing the potential of local resources such as individuals, businesses and communities" [72] (p. 2);

- Metro–rural mountain projects that overturn the cleavage, where the relationship between cities and mountains is not assumed to be conflicting and dichotomous but as form of hybridisation, where the boundaries are not clear-cut and the plots overlap in an unprecedented way [73,74]: In this sense, cultural projects become the framework within which to re-weave the threads between cities and mountains, with a view to co-creating a virtuous exchange between residents and tourists or between old and new inhabitants. It is in this way that the various forms of the contemporary Alpine culture use languages, in the broadest sense, which originate in the mountains but are contaminated by contemporary urban experiences, or, vice versa, use a typically urban language that is reworked within an environmental context that becomes an artistic stimulus to innovate and thereby create something specific for the territory. To this end, a pioneering experience was *Festival Torino e le Alpi* (Turin and the Alps), promoted by Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation and developed in the Western Italian Alps. The aim of the festival was to stimulate a cultural offer that starting from a big city such as Turin could create a system with mountain environments, considered from the dual perspective of inspiring contexts and places of cultural production. A qualitative research study carried out on the call for proposals for the cultural and artistic projects [75] shows that they were closely linked to the elements of the local cultural heritage, with the goals set including the desire to de-seasonalise the predominant winter flux of tourists and the revitalisation of abandoned places such as Alpine hamlets or historical places such as fortress but also raising awareness about the environmental and climatic issue. Furthermore, it was noted that the projects made it possible to recruit internal human resources and to involve external resources, as well as to include many local actors, from nature guides to farms and schools. These are experiences that lead to the definition of a counterculture of the mountains, now tied to an outdated image in which the mountain is seen as a place of rural idyll in contrast to the urban context, creating a new Alpine image [76];

- Projects in which the cultural practices concern that generational deposit that makes a place, such as a craftsman's workshop, the symbol of a tradition that is renewed over time but also the symbol of the territory itself. Projects that convey new images and representations thanks to that capacity for local innovation that transforms know-how, an expression of local culture, into a polarity that creates new economic and social opportunities and, above all, reinforces local identity through intergenerational transmission [77,78]: These cases include the work of *L'Institut Valdôtain de l'Artisanat de Tradition (IVAT)* established with the aim of promoting the craftsmanship of Valle d'Aosta Region, keeping it alive at the professional level, among the materials and objects still produced and in use today. The souls of Valle d'Aosta craftsmanship range from the production of everyday objects to genuine artworks, both recognised as the heritage of the local population due to the wealth of knowledge and know-how possessed by those working in the sector. The arts practiced are sculpture, turning, carving and weaving using locally available materials and others that have been recently introduced. IVAT operates at various levels through the location of "cells" in the region, "active" points where it is possible to benefit from local craftsmanship in different ways through the marketing of handcrafted objects via a system of boutiques and corners spread throughout the region, in addition to an e-commerce channel; the preservation and appreciation of the craftsmanship of the past thanks to a network of museums (*MAV—Museo dell'Artigianato Valdostano di tradizione; MAIN—Maison de l'Artisanat International; MMB—Maison Musée Berton*); the transmission of knowledge through ateliers, educational and training opportunities aimed at the public but also at professionals in the arts and crafts of the Valle d'Aosta; documentation, thanks to a research centre (which comprises a library and a media library). The protection of modern craft products is guaranteed by the *L'Artisanà* quality mark, which certifies their origin and quality. The mark, which is both a product and territorial mark, brings together more than fifty artisan producers.

4.2. A Typology of the New Places of Cultural Production

The analysis carried out made it possible to identify these new places of cultural production within a local development framework:

- *Mountain huts*: Places that position themselves as outposts of Alpine culture by intercepting new trends and contributing to a renewal of the identity of local communities [79]. From this perspective, mountain huts position themselves as:

    (a) Places of intangible culture, which are not only stops for nature walks but also spaces for community discussion. The collective dimension to which the architectural object of the hut refers provides, on one hand, the opportunity to make use of spaces for the production of cultural practices, and on the other hand, to implement innovative ways of sharing Alpine culture among the various stakeholders and local actors (managers, inhabitants, guests and artists);

    (b) Places of architectural experimentation and consequently also forerunners of contemporary architecture, bringing in flows of people not specifically linked to hiking but rather to the technical and specialist sector of the world of architecture, contributing through their symbolic and representative value to the new season of Alpine development;

    (c) Places that represent the territory and the landscape in which they are set, to such an extent that they enter into the logic of territorial marketing, recognised as elements of the territory that convey a series of values and promotional images of the territory.

- *Iconic "buildings" of local history:* These are places that are divided into:

    (a) Landmarks that are part of the historical–architectural heritage on the local but also regional and even supra-local levels, i.e., buildings characterised by

their large size, strong historical recognisability and iconic and symbolic value: Fortresses, castles, towers, abbeys and mills fall into this category. Especially in the case of castles and fortresses, these are architectural elements that are not easy to manage in terms of the economic resources required for their running, ordinary maintenance and more. It is mainly for this reason that organisational choices remain in the hands of the centres of managerial reference and thus, in most cases, the cultural elites of the big cities where the regional government resides. This element of top-down management has several possible consequences. In some cases, it represents that fundamental public support to create a managerial framework that guarantees the realisation of interesting cultural initiatives; in other cases, dominance over the local context does not allow these spaces to become real places of cultural transmission, and this causes the loss of potentially very important opportunities;

(b) Disused or abandoned buildings that play an important role within the landscape in which they are located and whose historical and architectural features (often relatively recent) marked an interesting moment in the territory's evolutionary process. Not unlike urban contexts, therefore, in the mountains, we are also often faced with "skeletons" of recent history that have great potential for recovery and reintegration into local territorial dynamics.

- *Hamlets*: As places emerging from a state of abandonment and desolation, they have recaptured the interest of people who have managed to convert an ongoing process of de-territorialisation. Indeed, in recent years, thanks to a renewed interest in the mountains, a new population resettlement has been generated, even if in a patchy and limited way compared with all the Alpine territories. The hamlets have, in some cases, become virtuous examples of recovery and revitalisation, starting precisely from the recovery of the threads of cultural transmission both in terms of the recomposition of the local community and through innovative entrepreneurship [80]. All this has quickly become humus in which to grow cultural initiatives, from the realisation of revisited traditional culture festivals to the realisation of collective literary moments of discussion.

- *Places of cultural production* that are responsible for cultural transmission for and with the local community: This category includes different types of spaces for cultural production, first and foremost, eco-museums; specialised visitor centres; workshops and art craft workshops, etc.;

- *Public spaces*: Given the territorial context in question, we can distinguish at least two types of public spaces that can be described as places for cultural production today:

(a) The first type refers to paths, woods, meadows and spaces immersed in the natural context; they are the expression of the great local environmental heritage and become places for experimenting with cultural practices, which, not unlike what happens in the public spaces in our towns and cities, "can activate new relations, in which different possibilities of use and new encounters can be experimented with" [81] (p. 32). Public spaces that we might, therefore, refer to as spaces of discovery as far as the mountain context is concerned, in which artists subvert consolidated balances and explore new spaces and areas. From open-air installations to land art to the creation of thematic cultural routes, the natural heritage becomes an active element in artistic production and enters the process of territorialisation in an unprecedented way;

(b) The second type concerns the spaces of urbanisation also present in the mountains, especially in the Alps. Small rural and mountain towns now embrace real urban lifestyles that become part of territorial practices [82]. Consequently, these urban centres increasingly support cultural activities and initiatives with important repercussions both on the local community, building a new identity, and in terms of appeal to the outside world. Small urban squares surrounded by unique landscapes become the centre of experimental cultural practices,

spawning new relational spaces, in the same way that arcades and streets become places for street art.

5. Conclusions

As the results of the case study analysed in Section 3 show culture-based practices in mountain areas are capable of "producing territory", not unlike urban contexts, creating new relationships, generating new uses of space, reconfiguring landscapes, constructing new frameworks of significance for the territories, and boosting local communities by involving inhabitants and others. In fact, "Nowadays, heritage and culture appear to be identity levers that allow rural and peri-urban societies to re-create their social links and to take control of their own development" [83] (p. 7).

In addition, the more general taxonomy of culture-based practices in rural and mountain areas and the typology of the places of new cultural production in mountains discussed in Section 4 show that first of all, contemporary Alpine culture is a local resource, which can become a "grip" with which to leverage local development processes, following a consolidated interpretation of territorial studies [84,85]. Secondly, they show that contemporary Alpine culture can act as a driver for activating practices in the territory, which "work between" cultural transmission, and historical and social lacerations, providing new creative stimuli and nurturing that fertile ground within which new paths of local and sustainable development can grow. Finally, they show that in these new spaces of creativity, it is possible to experiment with innovative activities, avant-garde expressions and revisited languages that contribute to drawing (not only in an abstract sense) new images of the contemporary mountains.

Territorial projects and cultural projects increasingly become an effective entanglement within which local networks are activated [86] and potential uses of mountain territories emerge. "In the construction of strategic scenarios, art can, therefore, play a dual role, of content and container, where the content consists in individual episodes (festivals, exhibitions, productions, etc.) which, if conceived in the long term and networked, are able to create stable collaborations in the territory with specific skills and professionalism linked to culture, communication, new media and creativity. But art also becomes a container or frame within which players and projects of a different nature converge and find meaning within this framework" [87] (p. 27). In this framework, the taxonomy and the outcome of the analysis show the multifaceted nature of culture-based practices and their effects on the territory, linking them to real economic activities, which profoundly affect the development of territories, and to socio-diversity activities that re-generate local communities. As also stated by Bonerandi and Hochedez, "the cultural project can represent a means of making a social group feel that it belongs to the same territory and shares the same identity" [88] (p. 28).

In this sense, contemporary mountain culture is configured as a driver that:

- Encourages a dialogue between new and old inhabitants of the mountains, producing a cultural hybridisation of ideas, values and visions;
- Links cultural continuity and discontinuity, blending tradition and modernity in a perspective of innovative reproduction, without accepting an inescapable destiny of re-proposing the past in a purely folkloristic and aesthetic key;
- Activates the territory by making it a key player in contemporary life through different types of projects;
- Supports new design of territory, use of space and appreciation of local resources.

In conclusion, contemporary Alpine culture can become that element that can help to free the mountains from an image that has imprisoned the environment, its inhabitants and its spaces for a long time. Alpine territories become the product of a cultural action elaborated through various modalities by different stakeholders, who are increasingly new inhabitants, guests, temporary inhabitants and not just residents. In this way, the risk of leaving the image trapped in the "story of Heidi", which has focused so much on the museification of the rural idyll, is avoided, and a different perception of the landscape is

favoured, following a complex and modern idea of territory as expression of movement, creativity and resilience.

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