

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

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## ŁÓDŹ–KRAKÓW

# XXIX INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON URBAN FORM

Urban Redevelopment and Revitalisation. A Multidisciplinary Perspective

6<sup>th</sup> June – 11<sup>th</sup> September 2022, Łódź–Kraków

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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 completed<sup>1</sup>, 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 area<sup>2</sup>.

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.

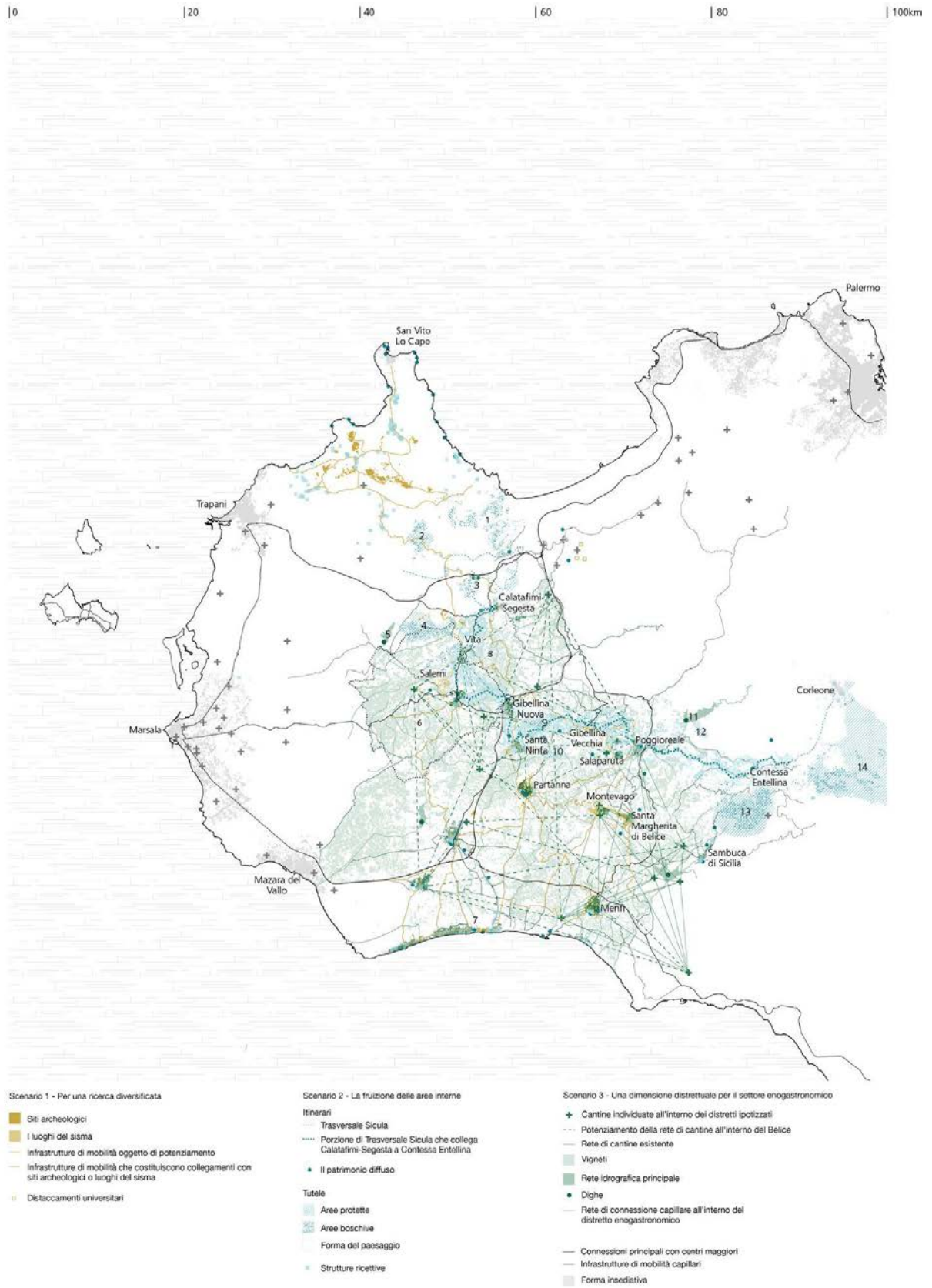
### Critical mapping and drawing as a design tool

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.

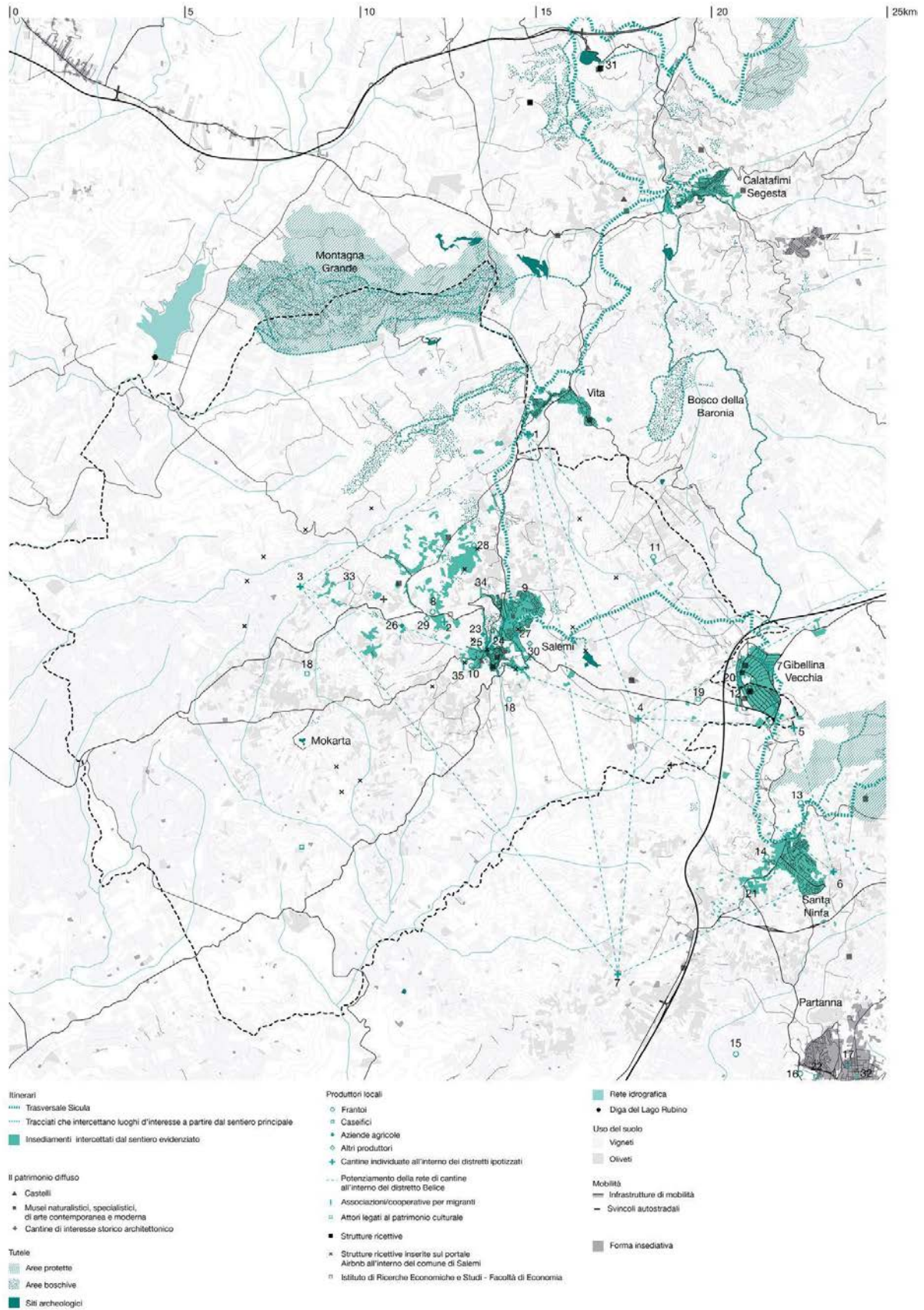
<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the reference is to the Laboratorio Belice 80, with the project of the open-air theatre (Marcella Aprile, Roberto Collovà, Alvaro Siza Vieira, 1984–1987), the rearrangement of Piazza Alicia and the surrounding roads (Roberto Collovà, Alvaro Siza Vieira, 1991–1998) and the recovery 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).

<sup>2</sup> 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’<sup>3</sup> (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.

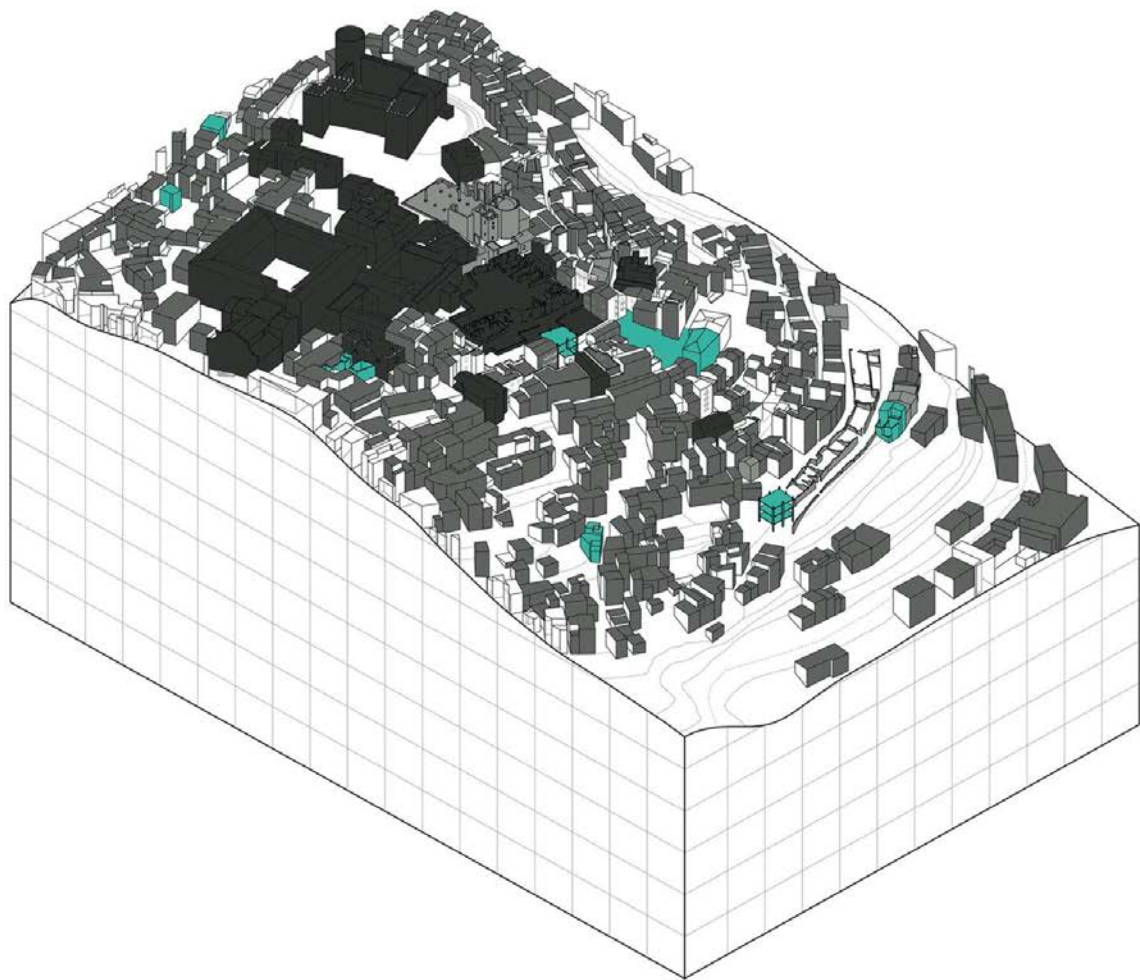
Finally, it made an attempt to bring the look closer to the inter-municipal scale, highlighting the most significant elements that recurred at the various scales. Thus, a figure is outlined, composed of a section of the *Transversale Sicula* which rings a series of small towns in the Belice valley – 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.

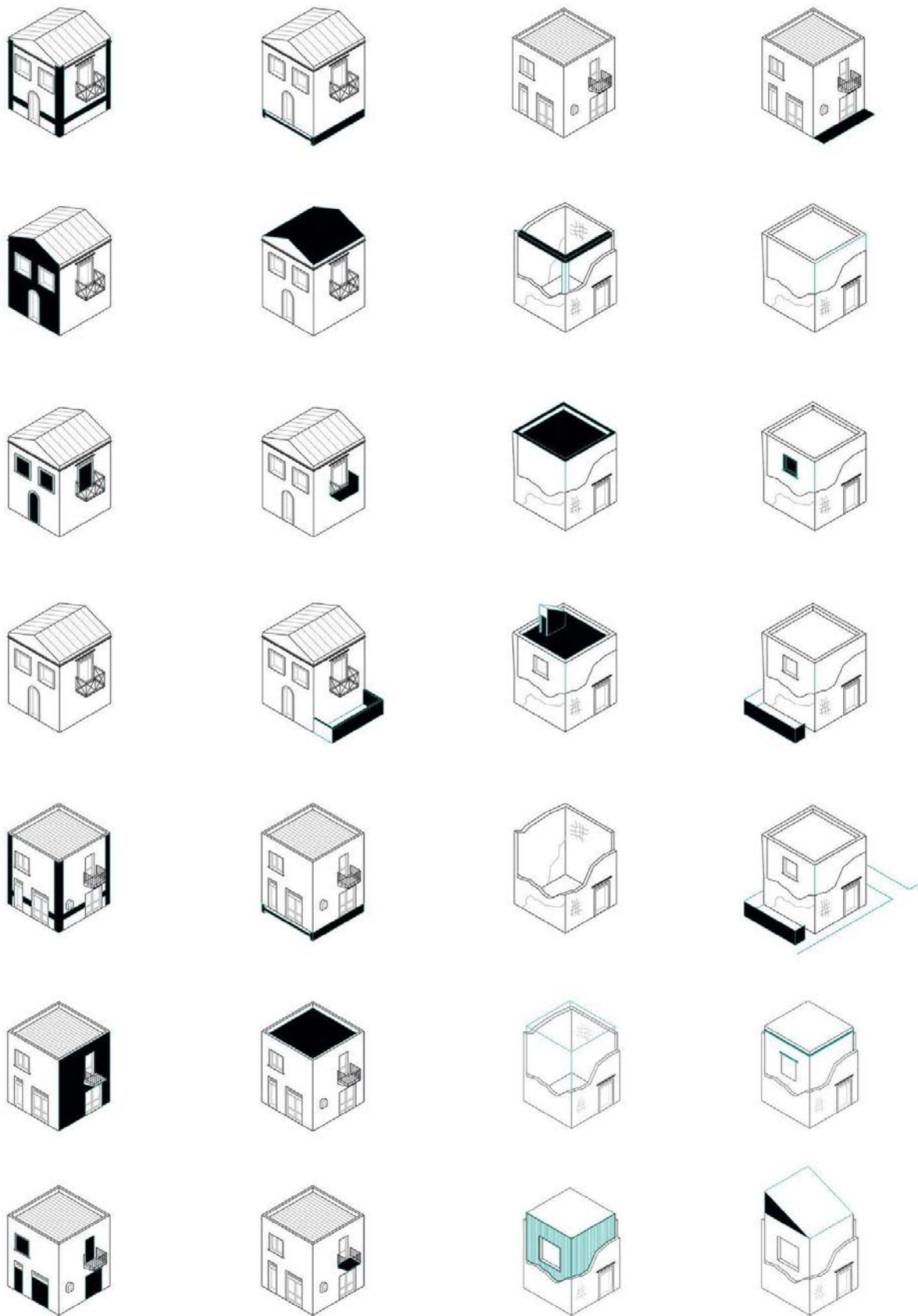
In fact, before proceeding with the phase of meta-project focuses, it was carried out an operation of identification of possible actions on the existing heritage, which allowed outlining an abacus of possible interventions on the artefacts starting from the previous considerations related to their critical 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

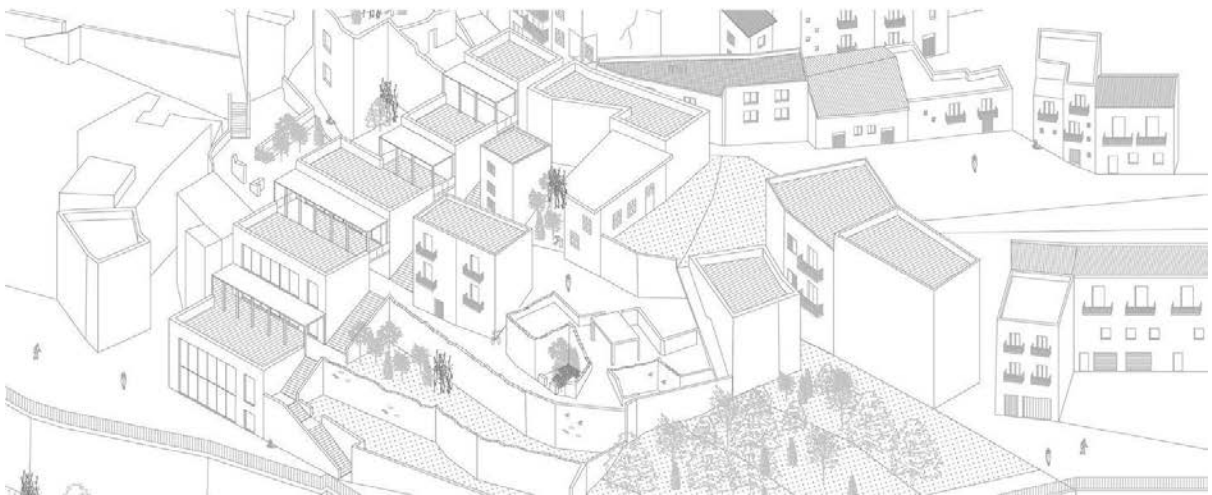
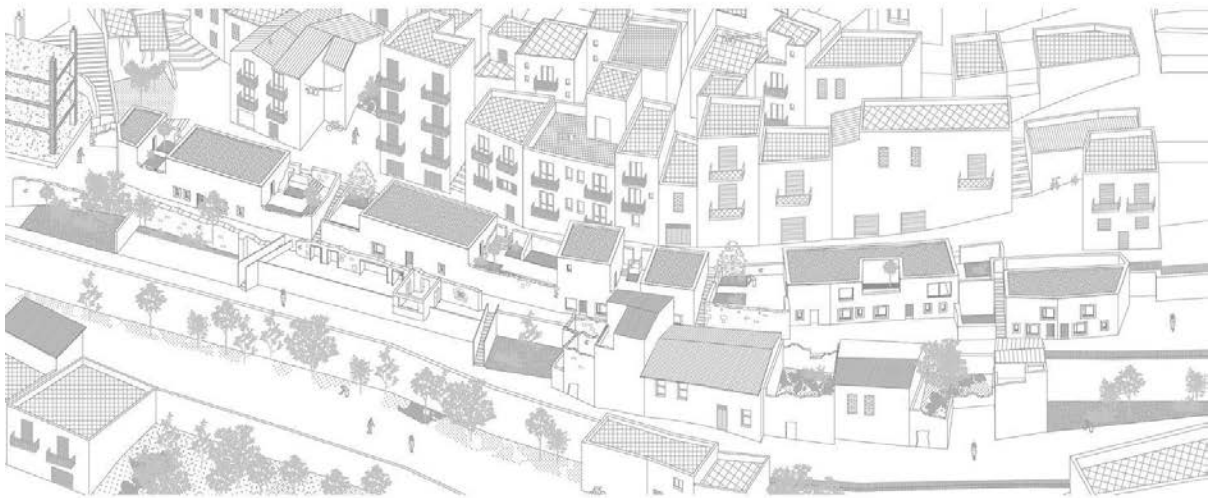
Even before defining transformation hypotheses, therefore, the project was used to build a dialogue with local actors, from the administrative and non-administrative spheres, based on a better and more articulated understanding of the instances in the field. The overall purpose of the study suggested 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 Salemi'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 spillovers<sup>4</sup>. 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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<sup>4</sup> 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.

