

## **Regeneration through lines. Walks and cycle paths as an opportunity to regenerate places in small and marginal municipalities in Italy**

Gloria Toma\*

### **Abstract**

Urban regeneration and slow travel or tourism are becoming increasingly important in the field of urban planning. The aim of this paper is to study slow travel lines, such as walks and cycle paths, as possible tools for urban and territorial regeneration. The study proposes a linear regeneration that connects distant territories, rediscovering their hidden relationships as part of a unique storyline. The reasoning is given step by step, with the first three sections focused on the concepts and aspects of regeneration, slow travel and slow lines. In the end, the fourth section analyzes the case study of Via Francigena and the Apulian Aqueduct cycle path in Italy. In conclusion, along these two lines, possible design solutions for urban regeneration are experimented.

### **Keywords**

Urban regeneration, slow travel, slow lines, marginal areas

---

\* Architect, PhD student in Sustainable Land Management at the University of Bari Aldo Moro and Polytechnic University of Bari

## **Urban and territorial regeneration: concepts, places, scales**

Urban regeneration is gaining more and more importance over time in the field of urban transformation.

This paper resumes a reflection begun during the author's master thesis in Architecture and Urban Design at the Polytechnic of Milan together with Veronica Introini and supervised by Professor Paolo Pileri and the architect Rossella Moscarelli.

It aims to explore how a regeneration based on slow travel lines could represent a real opportunity of rebirth for 'undecided spaces' in marginal areas.

Starting from the meaning of regeneration, in Italian the single term 'rigenerare' [from latin *regenerare*] means «bringing back to a previous condition of efficiency, integrity, dignity, etc.» (1st def. Garzanti Dictionary). Looking at the English definition it means «the act of improving a place or system, especially by making it more active or successful» (1st def. Cambridge Dictionary).

Comparing the two definitions we can see two different ways of looking at this process: the first one more conservative and the second one more progressive. Considering now the entire concept of urban regeneration, the Oxford's Dictionary of Human Geography defines it «A term for the various strategies to restore profitability and/or repopulate areas of the city deemed to be in decline [...]. In essence, urban regeneration promises physical, material, or spatial solutions to social and economic problems. Given that it almost always involves land at least already partly occupied and in commercial use».

Although this definition is quite recent, similar processes have distant origins referring to the numerous urban transformations that occurred in adaptation to social changes. The incipit of the history of urban regeneration can be established in the second half of the 20th century, first in

the United States and later in Europe, coinciding with the coming of neoliberal economic system (Alongi, 2017). This has led to the disposal and abandonment of many industrial areas which have been the main objects of this transformation. These were interventions on individual buildings or entire city areas. Before the appearance of the concept of regeneration, these processes were named with various terms such as recovery, reuse, renewal and redevelopment, often treating them as synonyms. However, it is necessary to distinguish these terms both from each other and from urban regeneration since the latter constitutes a step forward (LaVarra, 2016). Indeed, while the others remain mostly confined to the formal field, an urban regeneration provides for an integrated policy that includes different disciplines and actors, considering economic, physical, social and environmental conditions and aimed at overall and lasting recovery (Losasso, 2015, Musco, 2009). The purpose of regeneration is to change the face and way of living a place, leading to a better quality of the environment (Losasso, 2015). For this reason, communities play a central role in the process. Here, communication and participation are part of the project producing interest and awareness (Losasso, 2015). From these considerations comes an idea of regeneration that does not create spaces for their own sake but places for people. From this point of view, the regeneration process can look beyond the industrial recovery intervention. It could concern the general urban context looking at urban public spaces that are no longer inhabited and experienced by the population (LaVarra, 2016). These are spaces that have lost their significance and that could be defined as ‘undecided’ (Clément, 2005). This term was firstly used by Gilles Clément (2005) describing wastelands resulting from abandonment. However, this concept could be broadened to include various issues related to urban planning and close

to this indeterminate situation. For example, a square is a place where, since ancient times, public activities have been concentrated, especially in European towns. In essence it is «a free area that opens up in urban tissue used as meeting place for citizens» (Treccani encyclopedia). It is known that squares were born as places dedicated to the community, to meeting and exchange. Many squares are no longer like this; they have become places of passage, emptied of people and filled with cars. Already Camillo Sitte in his book 'The Art of Building Cities' spoke about a change in the meaning of squares whose vital functions have gradually been absorbed inside the buildings, leaving an inanimate void (1889/2020). The square is just an example of the many issues on which it would be necessary to make a deeper reflection. In this part the reasoning leads to suggest a specific way to act in front of regeneration of 'undecided spaces', that is thinking about their meaning. From defining this aspect, it could become easier to define the goal of the project. Reflecting on the meaning of places could be the fundamental premise in a regenerative process that intends to reactivate places. These 'undecided spaces' are not peculiar to specific territorial areas but can be found both in the city and in the small and medium-sized municipalities far from it (Clément, 2005). This paper intends to dwell in particular on what is not a city considering small towns and marginal areas.

Talking about marginal areas, it is now necessary a step backward and a leap in scale from the urban to the territorial, in order to explain the concept. The social changes of the last few decades have led to the creation of a deeper gap between the city and the surrounding area, leading to the definition of marginal areas. They can be defined as territories with an economic and social development negatively unbalanced with the territorial context (Regione Piemonte, 2010). These territories, in particular the small towns (Inferior to 5000 inhab.) are increasingly affected by the huge flow towards the opportunities offered by the big

cities, causing depopulation (UVAL, 2014). Speaking of territorial regeneration, in these contexts the main purpose should be to reduce the marginality condition. This means to focus on the study of connections and relationships, thinking of solutions that are not destructive for the territories.

Working to overcome this isolation could also give greater support to small regeneration projects that try to solve a territorial problem by acting locally. Therefore, regeneration projects for the 'undecided spaces' of marginal areas requires an approach in which local and territorial act simultaneously. This part made it possible to define some aspects concerning the type of regeneration this paper intends to deal with. First, a regeneration that acts locally starting from the meaning of places, a meaning that goes beyond the present by looking at the past and the future. Secondly, a regeneration with a broader look that from these small points can see a common thread, that is relationship that unites distant places and contexts. The next step is to think about the concrete forms that this regeneration could take.

### **Shapes of regeneration: from points to lines**

From the aspects defined above, this section tries to go deeper to better define the formal aspects of regeneration by looking at the current situation. In this regard, it may be useful to look at 'Archipelago Italia' which tries to outline a panorama of regenerative strategies. It is a 2018 exhibition curated by Mario Cucinella at the Venice Biennale. This exhibition makes an effort to unite some projects aimed at relaunching marginal territories. Like a journey, which runs through the Italian peninsula from north to south, up to the islands, the selected projects bring out some recurring strategies: (1) A point system that provides for interventions

carried out in different points that are part of an overall strategy; (2) A block or line system that creates a strong spatial feature or recovery of an important block of buildings; (3) Magnet objects with the construction of a symbolic place around which a fabric or a network is formed; (4) Small plots or the creation of small networks of places; (5) To erode the abandonment that acts progressively starting from some points making them accessible (De Rossi, 2018) (Fig. 1).

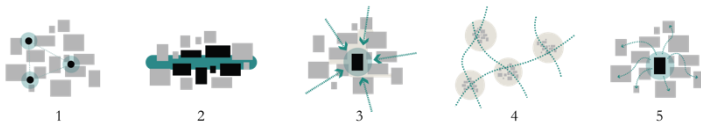


Figure 1 – Regeneration strategies from ‘Arcipelago Italia’ (Author's elaboration)

In these strategies comes out an attitude towards regeneration that can be defined restrained. In fact, they propose punctual or strictly linked interventions to a limited area of the territory, mostly within urban centers boundaries. All these strategies may not be enough to reactivate marginal territories. It could be necessary to go beyond the administrative boundaries to get out of the condition of isolation. In this case the line system (2) could be the most suitable. However, this one should be able to broaden the gaze towards a territorial scale capable of putting margin and center on the same level. A line can be long enough to create a relationship between distant territories and thin enough to get in touch with elements and aspects of the urban scale. The aspects of the lines can be taken up by some people who have made this simple element the subject of entire studies. For example, Kandinsky clearly expresses the difference between line and point by saying that it represents “the trace of the moving point, therefore one of its products. The leap from static to dynamic is accomplished” (1968). The

anthropologist Tim Ingold also talks about lines in his book entitled *We are Lines* (2020). Here the line can be read as a trace made up of a series of footprints which are observed in sequence generating continuity. Comparing the individual footprints, explained by Ingold, to punctual interventions and the traces of a path to linear project actions, it becomes clear how a line can join, in the territory, a series of small interventions, which could have effects on the environment. Here comes out an idea of linear regeneration (Fig. 2) where the meaning of a single place can gain greater value if associated with a wider system. It could lead to the development of a storyline for the rediscovery of the territory. This rediscovery, this crossing of places, could then generate a flow of relationships which reactivates the places it touches, producing a renewal.

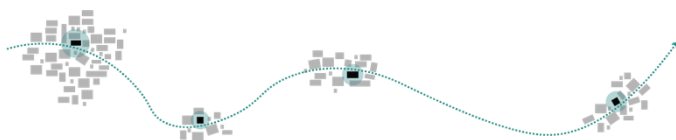


Figure 2 – Linear regeneration concept (Author's elaboration)

### **Walks and cycling paths: tools for a linear regeneration**

The concept of a linear regeneration, that works on the relationship between distant territories, needs a practical declination. This section of the paper will introduce slow mobility lines linked to tourist purposes. In particular, it will discuss how slow infrastructures can become tools on which to develop a regeneration process.

We can find lines in many things surrounding us, however the lines we will consider will be those of mobility, i.e. those created by the movement of people. Modern mobility, is expressed in particular in instantaneous communication, in

the circulation of products and in population movements whose motivations are mostly linked to migratory phenomena, professional mobility and tourism (Augè, 2010). Tourism has assumed ever greater importance, so much that the period in which we live can be defined as the age of tourism, as this phenomenon has generated a real industry (D'Eramo, 2017). The direction taken by tourism is far from sustainable; on the one hand it is based on the consumption of the tourist product by the masses, creating huge profits for investors: on the other hand, it risks becoming destructive for the places and territories concerned (D'Eramo, 2017). However, there are alternatives, an opposite direction that is gaining importance in recent decades: slow tourism and/or slow travel. There are different definitions for these two concepts. Sometimes we choose to consider them as synonyms. Overall, they are proposed as an alternative to mass tourism, focused on the quality of the experience, sustainability and a different attitude towards the places, cultures and people (Pileri, 2020). Furthermore, it is an idea of tourism that is not bound to a certain period of the year but can lead to a seasonal adjustment of flows and therefore to less pressure on the territory. However, it should be noted that there are differences between the concepts of slow tourism and slow travel. These refer to the purpose. Looking at the term 'travel', it derives from latin *viaticur* which means 'what concerns the way' (Etymological Dictionary). The concept gives thus importance to what lies in the middle rather than just the starting and ending points (Pileri, 2020). From this point, the paper will therefore insist on the use of slow travel. Among the infrastructures dedicated to slow travel we find walks, trails, cycle paths, bridleways, historic railways and river routes. In their relationship with the landscape they are clearly different from fast infrastructures like highways and railways. Fast infrastructures, by their nature and necessity, impose themselves as a foreign element. Slow lines, instead,



develop in several cases from existing paths, well integrated with the territory. This is a crucial point in the case of marginal areas. While speed tends to skip certain territories, the slowness of these lines allows us to get in touch with the realities of the crossed places, «slowness acts like a lens that reveals invisible details» (Pileri, 2020, p.43).

### ***The Italian road to slowness***

In recent years, an ever-greater interest in more sustainable tourism has been growing in Italian institutions. They started to pay attention to the numerous local associations that earlier than tried to enhance the slow mobility lines present in their territories. In particular, we can find 'Extraordinary Plan for tourist mobility 2017-2022' (MIT, 2017) which identified four existing national slow mobility networks: the Atlas of Walks (Atlante dei cammini), the National System of Tourist Cycle-paths (SNCT), the CAI's Sentiero Italia (SI) and the network of Historic and Tourist Railways. Looking at walks and cycle paths, there are several long-distance routes that would lend themselves to a regenerative strategy discussed above. The Atlas of Walks supervised by the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage, aims to collect the network of historical, natural, cultural and religious paths present on the Italian territory through a single mapping. It currently has 44 routes that have been deemed suitable (MiBACT, 2016). In summary, the Atlas represents a necessary summary table which does not make the effort to imagine these lines as something more. They mostly concern routes connecting recognized and already valued tourist attractions. The SNCT is a project by MIT and MiBACT which involves the completion or entire construction of 10 national cycleways. Unlike walks, this program provides funding through the 'budget laws' of 2016 and 2017 for the construction of the infrastructure. Also, these lines are part

of the wider European panorama of 'Eurovelo'(MiBACT, MIT, 2017).

The length of these lines is not an aspect to be underestimated. In Germany it has been shown that long routes favor socio-economic regeneration (Pileri, 2020). Moreover, by touching distant territories, the long routes would allow for a fair distribution of the benefits. In fact, slow tourism has a constitutively dynamic character as opposed to the so-called 'destination tourism' which tends to concentrate the phenomenon in a specific area.

Returning to the routes present in the Italian programs, they concern routes that did not arise out of nowhere. It is about routes that rely on ancient or even more recent traces which in some way have left a mark in the territory they have crossed. These, in some way, have contributed to creating the landscape visible today. Examples in this regard are: (1) the Via Francigena which retraces the stages of Sigerico encountering various architectural artifacts linked to hospitality and religiosity from Rome to Canterbury (Del Boca, Moia, 2015); (2) or the VENTO cycle path that runs through the Po valley, encountering the culture and identity of places linked to water (Pileri, Giacomel, Giudici, 2016); (3) or the Apulian aqueduct cycle path which retraces the route of the aqueduct leading to the discovery of historical artefacts linked to this important infrastructure (Viggiani, 2001). These examples are shown to explain that it is not enough to design new walks or cycle paths to develop slow tourism. Instead, it is necessary to refer to paths and narratives already present and settled in the territory, where these lines have developed relationships over time. From this point of view, even the presence of small but recurring elements can say something about the identity of a route or a place. Here the experience of slow travel becomes a gradual and immersive discovery of places, a story that is known through slowness and that cannot happen through the filter of fast means of transport. It is no coincidence that man has

developed the most important relationships with the territory from simple actions such as walking (Careri, 2006). Precisely, this encounter between slow traveler and places represents the moment in which a linear regeneration begins to move.

It becomes clear that slow travel lines, with their features, looks as interesting tools. They represent an integrated structure on which to set up a regeneration program, a program able to overcoming marginalization and to respecting the territory at the same time. The presence of these lines becomes an opportunity to re-think the 'undecided spaces' that will build a new storyline for the territory and the line itself.

### **How can a line relate to a place? The case of Via Francigena in Italy and the Apulian Acqueduct cycle path**

The aim of this last section is to think about the relationship between the slow mobility lines and the territories crossed. In particular, how this relationship is declined in regeneration projects on an urban scale but which consider the broad vision of the territorial scale. To do this, two lines are chosen on which to set up an analysis and design hypotheses..

The study consists of: (1) general knowledge of the lines, (2) selection of a section for each line and analysis of the recurring themes or elements, (3) choice of a theme/element for each line and redesign of the pertinent public spaces.

#### ***Lines with their own history: Knowledge***

The selected routes are the Via Francigena in Italy and the Apulian aqueduct cycle path (Fig. 3). These are clearly two

lines of different types but they can both be traveled on foot or by bike. The reason for the choice lies in the fact that the two routes are among the longest (1,700km of Francigena Italian section; 500 km of Aqueduct cycle path) and encounter heterogeneous territories along their route.

Knowing the history of the tracks is certainly the first thing to start with. The Italian section of Via Francigena is only the final part of an even longer route that starts from England, exactly from Canterbury. It is a path that has medieval origins. In the past it was used for pilgrimages to Rome. The route has been reconstructed thanks to the diary of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Sigerico, who describes it in detail (Del Boca, Moia, 2015).



Figure 3 – Italian section of Via Francigena and Apulian Aqueduct cycle path (Author's elaboration)

With the spread of pilgrimages, hostels and hospices arose over time near existing religious places. In particular from

the 10th to the 12th century there are many buildings built along Via Francigena in the Swiss and Italian stretch (Spinazzè, 2015). Since 1994, Via Francigena has become part of the cultural itineraries of the *Council of Europe* and today it counts many travelers who, for reasons of sport or faith, travel it up to Rome (Ardito, Ferraris, Marcarini, 2020). The Apulian Aqueduct cycle path has a more recent history. It was created with the aim of retracing the pipelines of the hydraulic infrastructure. The Apulian Aqueduct is very important because it allowed the Apulian population to access to an unprecedented water resource. Its construction has led to the creation of various architectures along the entire route, such as bridges, tanks and fountains (Viaggiani, 2001). Currently, the cycle path can be traveled by bike and on foot, but the route is equipped only in small sections. Most part of the route has some transition problems and require a unitary project for enhancement and safety.

This first part of the analysis wanted to study the history of the lines in order to better understand their relationships with the crossed territories, revealing elements that belongs to the narrative of the line itself.

### ***Lines made by places: Analysis***

After the first part of the analysis, sections of about 50-60 km were chosen on which to carry out site inspections and analyses. The choice was concentrated on specific territories where the relationship with the line is not much developed. The 47 km stretch in Lomellina between Mortara (Pv) and Pavia was chosen for Via Francigena. This small stretch alternates between small urban centers and medium-sized municipalities where it often happens to find religious spaces and churches. All is located in a rural context with irrigation canals and typical 'cascine'.

The section chosen for the Aqueduct cycle path is

represented by the 67 km of the final section which develops in the marginal area of Salento hinterland (Puglia Region, Southern Italy), from the municipality of Nardò to Santa Maria di Leuca. Here the route runs alongside and through urban centers where it meets traces linked to the presence of the aqueduct such as fountains and tanks. Also in this case urban centers are inserted in a rural landscape with typical local architecture. The result of this second part of the analysis made it possible to bring out the recurring themes and elements along the two lines.

These elements arise motionless and ignored as if their meaning has been lost in time. For example, no one seems to notice the strange volumes that appear recurrently in the Salento area, i.e., the tanks (Fig. 4). It is necessary to work on understanding the meaning of these places and through a regeneration project to explain it both to the population and to the travelers who follow the narrative thread they belong.

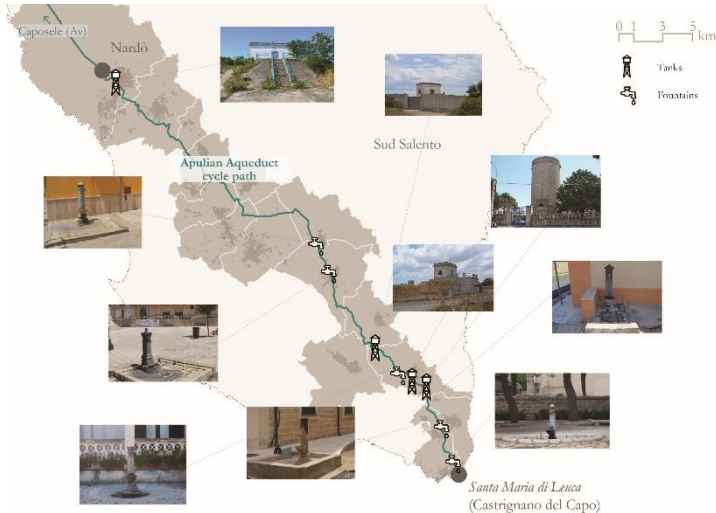


Figure 4 – Recurring elements along the final part of Apulian aqueduct cycle path (Author's elaboration)

### ***A new meaning: Project***

In the third part, one recurrent theme was chosen for each line to study the meaning. Looking at one single location of each element, the challenge is now to think about the redesign of this space with the aim of revealing the true meaning of that place. In addition, through this unveiling, the final aim is to create a link between the population and the travelers. In most cases the condition of things of the various elements occurred in a public space dedicated to the circulation or parking of cars. There was no particular attention to the pavement which was covered with asphalt (Fig. 5).



Figure 5 – Square near a tank along Apulian Aqueduct cycle path (Author's elaboration)

Although in this case only three spaces have been chosen in which to imagine a regeneration, the idea is to develop coordinated projects along the entire line. The regeneration projects (Fig. 6) wanted to play on the design of the floors, re-thinking the balance between the space dedicated to the

passage and parking of cars and the space dedicated to the free use of people, who could return to inhabit that place. This solution involves a reflection on the design and positioning of street furniture. The objective is to encourage people to stay and to get in touch with the story that links that place to a wider system.

These solutions aim to offer something more to the infrastructural project of a slow mobility line which therefore goes beyond the interventions, although fundamental, of positioning the signs and making the route safe.



Figure 6 – Regeneration hypothesis of a square near a tank along the Apulian Aqueduct cycle path (Author's elaboration)

### **Conclusions: towards a territorial project**

The examples of the two case studies made it possible to show the concrete possibilities of linear regeneration and to define a methodology that can be re-proposed in other cases. As seen, walks and cycle paths are not only infrastructures



aimed at leisure and sport but they represent a great opportunity both to bring marginal territories out of isolation and to regenerate those places that have lost their meaning.

A regeneration process cannot ignore the preliminary phases of knowledge and analysis since they are the elements on which to base the project. The analysis and mapping of the recurring elements allows to set the project on a theme. This gives coherence and a narration to the line that develops its own identity. However, it is necessary to develop the project in a bigger territorial dimension with inter-municipal cooperation.

Further studies should move in this way, working on a national scale planning, able, at the same time, to provide guidelines for interventions on an urban scale. Thus, to design a unitary project that acts locally with a global vision, creating not spaces but places on a human scale.

## References

- Alongi R. (2017), *La Narrazione dei Processi di Rigenerazione Urbana in Francia. Il Caso del PNRU*. Phd Thesis, Dottorato in Architettura, Arti e Pianificazione, Università degli studi di Palermo.
- Augè M. (2010), *Per un'Antropologia della Mobilità*, Milano, Jaca Book.
- Careri F. (2006) *Walkscapes: Camminare come Pratica Estetica*, Torino, G.Einaudi.
- Clément G., De Pieri F. (2005) (eds), *Manifesto del Terzo Paesaggio*, Macerata, Quodlibet Editore.
- D'Erama M. (2017), *Il Selfie del Mondo. Indagine sull'Era del Turismo*, Milano, Feltrinelli.
- Del Boca L., Moia A. (2015), *Sulla Via Francigena – Storia e Geografia di un Cammino Millenario*, Novara, De Agostini Edizioni.
- De Rossi A. (2018) (eds), *Riabitare l'Italia: le Aree Interne tra Riabbandoni e Riconquiste*, Roma, Progetti Donzelli.

- Kandinsky W. (1968), *Punto, Linea, Superficie*, Milano, Adelphi Edizioni.
- Ingold T. (2020), *Siamo Linee – Per un'Ecologia delle Relazioni Sociali*, trad. it. Daria Cavallini, Chivasso, Treccani.
- La Varra G. (2016) (Eds.), *Architettura della Rigenerazione Urbana*, Udine, Forum.
- Losasso M. (2015), *Rigenerazione Urbana: Prospettive di Innovazione*. *Technè*, 10, Firenze, Firenze University Press.
- MiBACT (2016), *Atlante dei Cammini*, [https://camminiditalia.cultura.gov.it/home-camminiditalia/atlante-dei-cammini/].
- MiBACT, MIT (2017), *Sistema Nazionale Ciclovie Turistiche*. [https://camminiditalia.cultura.gov.it/home-camminiditalia/sistema-nazionale-ciclovie-turistiche/].
- MIT (2017), *Viaggiare in Italia. Piano Straordinario di Mobilità Turistica 2017-2022*.
- Musco F. (2009), *Rigenerazione Urbana e Sostenibilità*, Milano, Angeli.
- Pileri P. (2020), *Progettare la Lentezza*, Gallarate, People.
- Pileri P., Giacomel A., Giudici D. (2016), *Vento – la Rivoluzione Leggera a Colpi di Pedale e Paesaggio*, Lavis, Corraini Edizioni.
- Spinazzè E. (2015), *La Luce nell'Architettura Sacra del X-XII Secolo dalla Romanide alla Toscana*. Phd Thesis, Dottorato in Storia delle Arti, Università Ca' Foscari IUAV di Venezia.
- Uval (2014), *Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne: Definizione, Obiettivi, Strumenti e Governance*.
- Viggiani C. (2001), *L'Acquedotto Pugliese*, Benevento, Hevelius Edizioni.