Enhance the Public Space: An Ecomuseum for Monterosso Almo (RG) in Sicily

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Abstract. The city has become the place of sustainability and public space is one of the main elements of this concept: it does not consume land, it recovers the existing building assets, it works with requalification, re-design, accessibility and availability. In this sense, public space takes on an ecological and environmental connotation, supported by a growing respect for nature. Nowadays, in historical small towns, all works addressing the public space acknowledge an overlapping of traces and testimonies that identify those space as assets to be protected, but also made available to the public. In this regard, it is also necessary to protect the buildings that define this space. A tool is enhancement. Enhancement means taking actions aimed at giving value. Its objectives focus by integrating the architectural heritage into contemporary life, by strengthening social development, as well as the economy, and defining its roots and identity. Today, enhancement connects the past with the future and provides an occasion to highlight the tangible and intangible resources safeguarded by such heritage. For ordinary heritage the only possible strategy is represented by eco-museums, through a systemic approach towards all tangible and intangible elements. The case study is a very small town in the country of Ragusa, Sicily, Italy, is considered a ‘cultural, natural and architectonical landscape’ and reflects the combined works of nature and humankind, where cultural heritage is located both in rural areas, both in center of town. The city has an interesting old town consisting in two important historical area: Matrice district and San Giovanni district. In them there are small palaces built almost all after the earthquake of 1693, beautiful churches even older, beautiful woods and views that design public space. This research is aimed at retrieving the present architecture and landscape by using the existing structures to leave an indelible mark on renovation projects. The enhancement project guides the birth of the eco-museum; it identifies, selects and recovers the existing building assets, proposing attractive and economically interesting functions for public space. An action based on eco-museums helps breathing new life into a community and its heritage, promoting life, economy and tourism.

1. Introduction: public space and enhancement

“A public space refers to an area or place that is open and accessible to all peoples, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, age or socio-economic level. These are public gathering spaces such as plazas, squares and parks. Connecting spaces, such as sidewalks and streets, are also public spaces” according the good practies of Unesco for inclusion through the access to public space [1].

In Italy, the Charter of the Public Space says: ‘Public spaces are a key element of individual and social well-being, the places of the collective life of communities, an expression of the diversity of their
common cultural and natural heritage and the foundation of their identity, in line with the European Landscape Convention. The community recognizes itself in its public places and pursues the improvement of their spatial quality. Public spaces consist of open spaces (such as streets, sidewalks, squares, gardens, parks) and covered spaces created for the benefit of all (such as libraries, museums). Both, when they have a clear identity can be defined as "places". The goal is that all public spaces can become places» [2].

Figure 1. Localization and views of Monterosso Almo, in Sicily.

Public space is «a privileged place of relations, both social, economic, productive, both physical mobility and communication» [3] and allows the meeting. it is a social space, a space that exists in any urban, suburban or rural context. In the past, the public space was the space of representativeness and community of intent: often a square overlooked by the most important buildings. Today, it represents the improvement of citizens' quality of life and influences the psycho-physical well-being of man (think of the urban parks where you can do sports), but also social well-being because it creates meetings, distraction, socialization. In the consolidated city, the public spaces, are much appreciated, admired and chosen as a venue for meetings [4]. For this reason, it is necessary to enhance these spaces.

In this research, the term enhancement is used in a multidisciplinary way, involving the building and urban recovery, economics and socio-anthropological sciences; the interaction of these three sectors produces appropriate initiatives, both in terms of technologies and assessments. In general, enhancement means increasing the value of a cultural asset, but above all "putting an asset into value" that is to express the full potential of the cultural asset, its material and immaterial values, its potential, in other words it wants to improve the ways of perceiving the cultural value and it is an activity destined to increase the public use of the good. Enhancement concerns actions that can promote conservation interventions on cultural and building assets. It deals with the physical data and its transformations, its functionality and usability.

Enhancement includes educational purposes closely linked to the heritage, in order to improve the conditions of knowledge and, consequently, also the conservation of cultural and environmental assets, increasing their usability. It is also the main purpose of the enhancement to provide guidelines and promote the coordination of good practices in collaboration and at the service of the peripheral structures of the Administration operating in the territory, as well as other Administrations and Territorial Authorities, in order to give an increasingly significant role to local identities.
The involvement of local communities raises awareness of cultural heritage and leads citizens to recognise the identity of their heritage, to recognise it as their own and, consequently, to cooperate in its conservation. The integrated supply of resources can also generate direct economic impacts, with the outsourcing of activities and services related to its management, as well as indirect impacts [5]. The latter results not only from the best-known impact on the tourist industry, but also from the fact that the system that develops around the heritage increases the aspect of competitiveness of a territory, making it capable of attracting more than other human and financial resources, increasing tourist flows, as well as the establishment of productive activities not necessarily belonging to the cultural sector.

In short, we must value. Maximum expression of the integrated value are the Eco museums.

2. The study case

Monterosso Almo is a small town (3,500 inhabitants) in the north-eastern part of the province of Ragusa, on the edge of the provinces of Catania and Syracuse, located at the foot of Mount Lauro on a high ground to protect the valleys below. It is an internal area and its history, as a look out over the territories, is ancient; after the earthquake of 1693, it loses its importance as a crossroads; it is rebuilt on its own ruins and entrusted to the management of the small nobility and local bourgeoisie.

The Matrice district is the old town centre, the first to be rebuilt after the earthquake, but also the first to be founded in far more distant times, follows the existing orography the urban shape is similar to a spindle with narrow and elongated blocks and height development up to four floors. It still preserves a system of medieval framework with narrow and winding streets, and shows buildings of the seventeenth/nineteenth century, some of valuable workmanship. It also preserves some relics from the past that date back to the 5th century A.D. and the Norman period. The framework is identifiable in the road system that codifies the structure of the building elements and characterizes the enjoyment of the various urban views; roads and alleys suddenly open on places of environmental and architectural value, sometimes inside the settlement, sometimes with extraordinary openings towards the landscape. The geometry of the road sections is manifested in various forms and often the steep slopes of the roads are resolved in stairways or long curbs to gain an acceptable ratio between lift and tread. Most of the paving is made of coarsely squared lava stone “basolati” arranged according to parallel courses and with a central row that highlights the run direction.
The building fabric of context consists largely of poor artifacts, from a “minor architecture”, whose value does not consist in the monumentality of the single element, but in the set of components that contribute to form the image, the urban landscape of the neighbourhood. The building curtains adapt to the morphology of the site, giving life to complex architectural organisms, now reused through the unification of rooms both horizontally and vertically, and thus generating intersecting volumes.

A characteristic of the district is given by vaulted environments leaning against the rock, almost of the caves, in substruction and levelling of the upper floors. Monterosso Almo has seen the population decrease progressively over the last twenty years, also because of the construction of the Catania-Ragusa highway that has isolated it from the large traffic flows.

The local economy is based on agriculture, breeding and their distribution; however, the geographic position could allow an improvement of the economic conditions focusing on the proximity to sites that share cultural identities, natural beauties, history and traditions. In this sense, territorial contextualization becomes a tool to identify sustainable development potential oriented to the construction of a network of local systems as a tool for activating connection processes. The germs of such possibilities exist, in fact the Municipality is a member of the Associazione Borghi più belli d'Italia (Association of Most Beautiful Villages of Italy), is less than 20 kilometers from Palazzolo Acreide which is part of the Italian Heritage Unesco, and Acate and Chiaramonte Gulfi. These last two are part of the Vino Cerasuolo di Vittoria route. In addition, the city to which it refers most for purchases is Modica, located about 37 kilometres, another important centre of Sicilian Baroque.

3. Objectives and methodology
The research is the result of an agreement between the Municipality of Monterosso Almo and the University of Catania, scientific director Prof. Fernanda Cantone, for creation of “Guidelines for the redevelopment project of the Matrix district and its enhancement as a village”. The Municipality has requested a study of the potential of the place for tourist purposes.

The multidisciplinary approach that characterizes the meaning of enhancement is applied in this research. The study proposes a path of knowledge integrated with an existing protocol for the identification of the interventions to be carried out on the territory of Monterosso Almo. It starts from the enhancement tools - protection, accessibility and management - and identifies, analyses and selects the identity characteristics of Monterosso, to encourage interventions and activities for the promotion of their cultural identity.

The starting point is the Un-habitat 2020 protocol, created by the United Nations. It has developed innovative approaches in the field of public space, based on the active participation of the community. The study applies this protocol and integrates it with phases of discussion and deepening to give importance to the demands of the community, transforming them into project choices.
The research is divided in steps:
- step 1 Project Preparation: It provides initial information for an overview of the context, with information on demography, history, culture, infrastructure and social dynamics of the study area. At this stage, the site is organized and the cultural heritage is researched.
- step 2 Data Collection: it involves the community and its civic sense. The community is asked about the spatial perception of places and their needs.

In particular, the research followed the following five points:
- Remark: Analyse daily life and understand user activities and behaviours. Make sure you acquire information and data about what is happening in and around the site.
- Digital Survey: Obtain statistical information from the community about their perception and opinion of public space and its walkable radius.
- Interviews: Collect data on specific aspects of the site that require specific skills or knowledge from selected people.
- Exploratory walks: Experience public space through the eyes of everyday users by walking and exploring the neighbourhood together.
- Focus group discussion: Gather people’s opinions and ideas on how they perceive public space and collaboratively map challenges and opportunities.

- step 3 Analysis: the collected data are selected and analysed to highlight the main issues related to public space. The study produced a map of results and highlighted the main challenges and opportunities.
- step 4 Project Focus: this phase modifies and expands the Un-habitat protocol because it transforms the challenges and opportunities identified in phase 3 into areas of intervention.
- step 5 Project/Comparison: this phase, which is not forecasted in the Un-habitat Protocol, provides for the comparison with the community. It was a constructive and fundamental phase.
- step 6 Exploitation: this phase has been added to the protocol. It concerns the creation of a network of values that promote cultural identity and tourist and economic developments.
- step 7 Eco museum: final stage of the process (addition). It identifies strategies for the global exploitation of heritage. It comes from the confrontation with the Public Administration. The Eco museum is the economically viable solution to highlight, disseminate and promote the heritage of Monterosso Almo.

![Figure 4. Fisical characters of Monterosso district.](image-url)
In summary, the studio proposes a series of actions that reveal the cultural identity of Monterosso Almo and propose design strategies for quality public space. The outcome of these analyses led to the conviction that the best strategy for strengthening and communicating the cultural heritage of Monterosso Almo is the birth of an ecomuseum, as a final and management phase of the process described above.

4. The research
The research started with the organization and preparation of the project timeline and the identification of the main stakeholders.

4.1. Step 1 Project preparation
In this phase, the city’s priorities, available time, budget and local capacities are identified.

Monterosso is a small town. The inhabitants are just over 3,000 and very few are young. Among the stakeholders were identified the few adult residents, the elderly of the "Circolo Garibaldi", a few young people who meet near the church Madre and Piazza Sant'Antonio, in the evening. Some members of the municipal administration, with different levels of education, were then chosen as stakeholders. Another group of stakeholders is composed of the students of the Degree in Architecture, SDS Architecture of Syracuse, University of Catania who have visited the places and have carried out a requalification exercise on Via Roma, proposing recovery solutions, some of which are architecturally interesting.

The results of the questionnaires are summarised below:
- the elderly would like to make the neighbourhood more welcoming, complain about the few people left and the state of so many buildings, once significant for the history of the country;
- adults would like incentives to return to the neighbourhood, both economic and cultural, as well as social and recreational incentives and would like to boost tourism;
- young people want places to meet, places to eat and play, open spaces to spend the evening.

Having examined the potential and material and intangible resources, stakeholders remain anchored to an idea of an economy based exclusively on traditional activities that include, for example, catering and recreation activities. The cultural, historical, landscape and gastronomic resources of Monterosso are not taken into account. For decades the economic reality of Monterosso was based on agriculture, forgetting the cultural values, landscape, craft.

4.2. Step 2, Data collection: security, inclusiveness, connectivity, accessibility and sustainability,
Through observation, digital survey, interviews, comparisons were acquired the following information:
- the town is not infamous or badly frequented also because the small community is quite healthy;
- the community is fairly aggregated so there are no difficulties for the equally well-accepted activities to be set up;
- there aren’t any marginalised social groups;
- on the main roads, there are no architectural barriers or obstacles to use, only sloping sections. The Mother Church, with its imposing staircase, is an exception;
- there are no parking spaces;
- to improve links between areas of the city, made up of narrow streets, difficult to cross by car, sometimes with steep stairs;
- few commercial activities;
- very few cultural activities, not least because of the lack of suitable spaces;
- very few leisure activities;
- Monterosso has implemented a green protocol for reforestation.
4.3. Step 3: Analysis of acquired data and criticality

In this phase, characterized by the selection and analysis of the collected data, the problems emerged concern the accessibility of some areas of the Matrice district through stairs a bit 'steep and paths a bit' articulated.

It emerges, on the part of the community, the request to equip the space in front of the church of Sant'Antonio, to prevent the stall of cars, make this place attractive. The requests are not critical and show little desire to participate in partnership initiatives. Many people have called for a strengthening of the tourist offer but almost no one intends to invest in this area. In this phase the elements that constitute the material and immaterial patrimony of Monterosso have been identified. Among them, the community has chosen which areas to operate in.

4.4. Step 4: Project focus and Step 5: Project/comparison

The areas identified by stakeholders in the questionnaires and interviews are:
- Piazza Sant'Antonio;
- the Via Roma and some buildings located here (Casa Scibilia);
- some small municipal buildings that are used once a year for the representation of the “Presepe Vivente” (Living Nativity);
- Palazzo Cocuzzza;
- the neighbouring woods;
- votive shrines which formed a religious path now abandoned.

A meeting with all stakeholders clarified the potential of some of the selected areas to which were added some indirectly identified in the previous phase. For the latter, there were moments of amazement, as often happens in the face of a novelty never thought of. The subsequent explanations gave exciting answers.

4.5. Step 6: Exploitation

Interventions and destinations of use are identified. We highlight the possibilities of transformation and conservation of the material heritage of Monterosso Almo.

In a reality like Monterosso Almo, the choice is to intervene on public soil and to generate appreciation by citizens, so as to stimulate investment. Today, the quality of the public space of Monterosso is delimited by buildings with anodized aluminium fixtures, from the unfinished, from buildings without plaster, from buildings with suspension carried out betraying the architectural model of the past, from remakes in style, from rather evident colourings. In the midst of this chaos there are valuable examples of civil and religious architecture of the past, abandoned and forgotten. and the public space is empty, without equipment, almost repellent to the passer-by.

Beautiful views of the surrounding landscape are not valued.
The project therefore provides for:
- the redevelopment of Piazza Sant'Antonio (project already completed, approved and financed);
- the reuse of Casa Scibilia to realize an exhibition and sale of product at km 0,
- the reuse of Palazzo Cocuzza and the setting up of a museum of contemporary art in an unused area;
- the restoration of the old pavement and the external stairs;
- the construction of a car park (as well as a PRG forecast);
- the establishment of equipped paths through the woods.

![Figure 6. Cocuzza Palace, ground floor plan, relief.](image)

This complex of interventions involves the entire town and is proposed as a network of actions to enhance the cultural heritage of Monterosso Almo.

4.6. Step 7: Eco museum

The basic principles of enhancement are based on the protection, accessibility and management of a given place. Its aim is the promotion of the cultural identity of the place itself. What better form of promotion than an Eco museum?

5. Results and discussions

An Eco museum represents an innovative cultural project aimed at promoting a specific region as a privileged context where there is a tight connection between mankind and nature: a place keeping the knowledge of local communities as well as environmental values, a place able to create a synergy among citizens and stimulate their ability to start alternative economic processes, and so on. An Eco museum can be defined as a formula allowing to harmonise the need for promotion/development of the values of a region with the need for protection/enhancement of cultural and environmental heritage [6]. H. De Varine affirmed that: “An Eco museum is an institution that manages, studies, uses for scientific, educational and cultural purposes the overall heritage of a community, including the whole of its natural and cultural environment. Therefore, an Eco museum is a tool promoting the people’s participation in the management of a region and in the development of the local community. First of all, it is done on purpose in order to trigger some changes”. The ultimate definition of Eco museum dates back to 1980 and was provided by Hughes De Varine. It was published in its English translation in 1985 on the magazine Museum by UNESCO.
The three keywords for an Eco museum are: “heritage”, “territory”, “population”. They are a perfect combination for the practical construction of an Eco museum [7].

According to museologist Peter Davis [8], a small-sized territory is the best in order to maintain tight relationships between a community and landscapes: the “meaning of a place”. It is a complex idea, linked to economic functions, topography, social activities, perception, appearance. A concept that is close to the one of “genius loci”, existing in every culture but more tangible in those places where there is still a close link with the territory, and living there has a strong meaning. The key point in an ecomuseum is, therefore, to highlight and enhance the “meaning of a place”.

In this sense, the Eco museum of Monterosso Almo is called to play a role of "collector" of planning, with initiatives of redevelopment, incubation and promotion of the company. It is proposed as a tool oriented to self-sustainability, innovation and sharing through an "Eco museal lens" that should facilitate the identification of the ecomuseum, with the aim of:

• Understanding needs;
• Conducting research on the economy and society;
• Understanding customs;
• Learning cultural language;
• Developing communication techniques and tools [9].

Moreover, from the point of view of possible interlocutors, the ecomuseum is configured as a reality of different networks, interconnected with each other.

The Eco museum of Monterosso is therefore composed of a series of places recovered, reused and enhanced that propose different thematic paths, inside and outside the city center.

Extra-urban routes:
- Monte Casasia naturalistic/archaeological route;
- Nature trail of the Parco Canalazzo;
- Nature/archaeological route of the Calaforno Park.

Urban routes:
- Spiritual itinerary (visit of the main religious buildings of Monterosso);
- Architectural itinerary (visit to the main civil buildings of Monterosso, visit to Palazzo Cocuzza);
- Craft route (visit to the main civil buildings used for the enhancement of intangible heritage and for the marketing of traditional assets).

6. Conclusions
«To value means not only to make assets functionally and technologically suitable for the uses and/or demands of the market (n.d.r.), but to equip them with an informative patrimony that must be structured in way to grow in the time, that contributes to increase both the exchange value and the value of goods and that is the condition to make their characteristics known, to predict their behaviour, to evaluate their propensities» [10], in order to make the process continuous. In particular, this project contributes to the promotion, enhancement and preservation of local traditions; it becomes a tool able to create jobs at a local level, focussing on environmental enhancement and social development, by strengthening the bond between a region and its community of people.

The project of Eco museum in Monterosso, with its intervention on public space, has the ability to reinvigorate a community meeting its changing needs. The initial objective is to prolong the life of more public spaces and keep them in good condition, the secondary objectives are disclosure, economy, tourism. With the Eco museum you could also identify what to conserve, what to transform, what to eliminate; understand the costs and economic sustainability of each project that composes it addressing the problem of waste of resources, turning challenges into opportunities [11], building social equity by helping to revitalise communities, planning sustainable developments and investing in renewal.
Monterosso Almo’s Eco museum will stimulate the participation of local residents, the members of this community. They will guarantee the same conditions necessary for local development and, in particular, the management of the common heritage. Monterosso Almo’s eco-museum is aimed at training citizens to become the players that will trigger development and social change. The main conclusions of the study may be presented in a short Conclusions section, which may stand alone or form a subsection of a Discussion or Results and Discussion section.

**Figure 7.** Monterosso Ecomuseum and project of external exposition in the court of Cocuzza Palace.

**Acknowledgment(s)**

Intervention on Monterosso Almo and relative images are taken from the degree thesis of Fabiana Indelicato entitled: For a virtuous process: an Eco museum project in Monterosso Almo (RG). Supervisor: Prof. F. Cantone, Catania University, SDS of Architecture, Syracuse, Sicily. Academic year 2019/20. The elaborations have been implemented and updated in the Agreement between University and Municipality of Monterosso Almo: Guidelines for the redevelopment project of the Matrix district and its enhancement as a village. Scientific Referent, prof. F. Cantone, 2020-2021.

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