

# The role of seasonal tourism in fragile territories. The case of Solanas, Sardinia

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## ABSTRACT

*Since the post-war period Italy has been invested by an epochal phenomenon of redistribution of population, economies and urban materials from highlands to lowlands, from the hinterland to the coastline. Moreover, since the 1970s, the development of the Mediterranean coastal territories assumed a character strongly oriented to tourism too, altering the balance sedimented through the years in these areas, converting many slow landscapes into intermittent territories triggered by specific seasons and monocultural activities. This proposal intends to reflect on the possible development weaving the destinies of such realities, in the awareness that the reactivation of these territorial systems could be led by the rediscovery of connections and emergencies often forgotten, silent traces able to give back values to these tired landscapes. Working through interconnected territorial structures means to consider their networks and their tangible and intangible capital, and this is an indispensable exercise in order to rethink our country and some of its reiterated development models. Starting with a few days of interdisciplinary seminars that took place in between Politecnico di Torino and Politecnico di Milano, and the organisation of a workshop on-site, Solanas was identified as an emblematic case, a valley able to explore these issues. Located in the south of Sardinia, annexed to the territory of Sinnai due to its ancient transhumance role, today it remains detached from the main inhabited centres, suffering strong isolation from welfare systems during the low season, and the exploitation of landscape resources because of mere tourist purposes during the high season. This condition of seasonal contraction, unfortunately rarely accompanied by a medium-long term planning, can be retraced along many other coastal areas of Mediterranean countries, becoming a specific fragility of our reality to take into consideration.*

## Keywords

Seasonal tourism,  
coastal territories,  
fragility, Sardinia.

## THE LITTORAL DESIRE AND THE YEARS OF THE ECONOMIC MIRACLE

Moving from the second post-war period, Sardinia was the object of a succession of events and reforms that radically changed its features. The first major territorial project was the eradication campaign of the *Anopheles Labbranchiae*<sup>1</sup>, in order to solve the malaria problem that still gripped the island: between 1944 and 1950 this campaign, strongly desired by the Rockefeller Foundation, brought malaria deaths to zero. For many people, the defeat of these epidemics represented a watershed in the history of this region: the photographic work carried out by Wolfgang Suschitzky<sup>2</sup> to document the eradication campaign was able to show a territory still presenting archaic features, a land out of time.

Quoting Cappai (2014), it is precisely this image of a silent and isolated island that fed the exotic imagery on which the Costa Smeralda consortium company was subsequently built. The reconstruction and the revival plan, which designated the development of the industry as a driving force to bring the region out of its backward state, strongly modified some territorial and social balances (Ruju, 2017). Part of the resources was allocated to industry and the tertiary sector with a consequent impoverishment of the agricultural and pastoral fabric, which until then had played an important role in the soil care (Meloni, 2015). The tertiarization also brought a new need related to leisure, and a consequent increasing attempt to exploit the territories resorting to a vision of recreation and regeneration.

Since its establishment in 1950, E.S.I.T. (Ente Sardo Industrie Turistiche)<sup>3</sup> had already started tourism promotion enhancing various forms of initiatives, but it is certainly with the Costa Smeralda establishment that the process of touristification became more evident. In 1962 the Consortium<sup>4</sup>, led by Karim Aga Khan, built the idea of a tourism based on the myth of contact with an uncontaminated and crystalline environment on one of the lesser-used corners of the island (Clemente 2015). The pencils of several renowned architects, both from the national and the international panorama, were asked to redesign the coast of Alta Gallura, converting it into an exclusive destination for élitarian tourism. The villas' construction tried to blend in among the Mediterranean scrub, silently unnoticed, also collecting among the building materials those of the local tradition, purchased already aged directly by the inhabitants of the surroundings (Clemente 2015).

Those soils that just a few years ago were considered of little value, generally left to women and used only for transhumances, acquired a new meaning in the growing touristic dimension.

Hand in hand with the increase in employment across the island, the increase of the middle-class well-being condition led to the pouring out of that possibility

1 / The *Anopheles Labbranchiae* are a type of mosquito responsible in the past for the malaria spread inside the Mediterranean territories.

2 / Wolf Suschitzky (Vienna, 1912 - London, 2016) took about 1000 photographs on the occasion of the malaria campaign in Sardinia between 1948 and 1950, acting as the operator for two movies entitled "The Sardinian Project" (1948) and "Adventure in Sardinia" (1950).

3 / In English "Sardinian Tourist Industry Authority".

4 / Consorzio Costa Smeralda, founded on 14th March 1962, defines a non-profit association, with its own statute, "geared towards promoting urban and territorial development, and exercising control over the architectural development of the area". For more information visit <https://www.consorziocostasmeralda.com/home.html>.

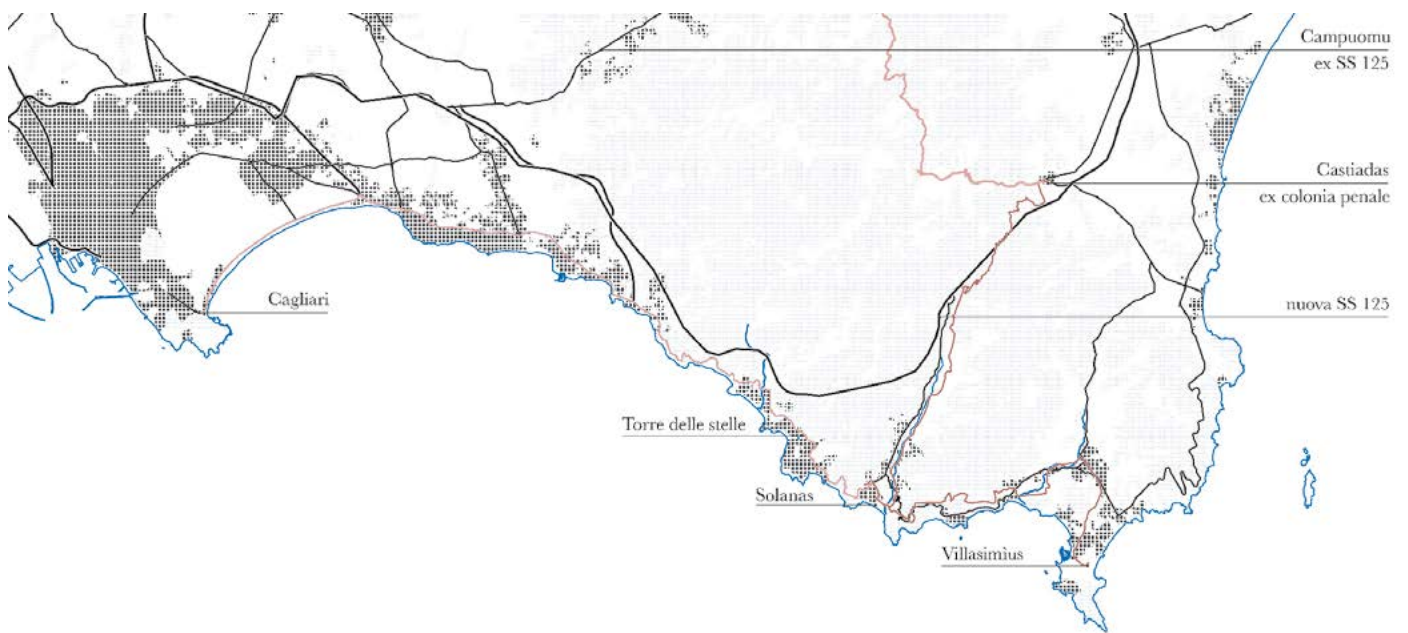


Fig. 1 / Territorial framework of the coastal strip of south-eastern Sardinia. Source: Workshop TeMa (2019)

of spending along the coasts, where the earliest settlements of second houses began to appear. As in other Italian regions, part of that wealth linked to the growing occupation, revealed itself in the form of new settlements and poured onto the coasts (Mininni 2019). Indeed, looking closer at some coastlines, scrolling through the historical images, it is possible to notice on the one hand the construction of new buildings, and on the other a slow impoverishment in terms of care for the agro-pastoral landscape, two phenomena moving in parallel. The traditional landscape – made of low walls, hedges, crops, the result of alliances and shared management of the territory, consisting of slow deposits of a long history – was gradually lost. In fact, the tourism brought an imbalance of the weights towards the coast, with a growing loss of those economic and productive relations with the hinterland. The coastal roads' strengthening has instead increased a geographical reading concentrated on the edge, which became the spatial support to implant a new idea of modernity dependent on tourism and leisure practices.

From the 60' of great constructive political and urban turmoil, the administrations were unable to give a regulatory response and – as in the case of Solanas, explored in this contribution – the planning tool came after, trying to regulate what has been already built, as a local and autonomous initiative in retrospect (Onni 2013).

## **TOURIST MONOCULTURE AS A TERRITORIAL FRAGILITY**

Di Campli (2019), quoting Jurdao (1979), affirms that the concept of “residential tourism” was born in the late 1970s to observe the spatial characteristics of urbanisation processes related to the construction of second homes for holidays, especially in seaside areas. It is a strident concept, arising from the inner tension between two opposing terms, the first connected to temporariness, the second expression of stability.

The idea that Sardinia can and should “live on tourism” has now entered the collective imagination, generating great expectations first on the coastal territories and, with touristic differentiation, even on particular inner areas’ features. In both cases, an idea of economics mainly linked to the extraction of value from the landscape resource prevails (Bandinu 1980). Moreover, it often happens that in coastal settlements the only quality value is linked to high environmental and natural values, with an urban quality that very often hides, often based on a concentration of people linked to seasonal flows of second homeowners. Today these settlements are starting to show some elements of fragility, both due to an anthropic load in the summer period (Cois 2019) and due to the difficulty of maintenance by the administrations. The maintenance difficulties are perhaps also accentuated by the loss of the sense of community that characterised these settlements in the past, capable of projecting domestic care towards them.

Nowadays any coastal administrations openly declare their intention to focus on tourism, even without conceiving a large-scale territorial vision, capable of dealing with other municipalities and of going beyond the simple extraction of value from the coast. Putting economies of care at the centre for those rural residues inside the coastal settlements could relieve the coast of part of the anthropic load, helping to rebuild those relationships with the innermost territories. It would be necessary today to exploit the weight of the tourism industry to rediscover some of those paths and signs proper of this ancient geography, considering an enhancement that goes beyond marketing campaigns and takes on demand for maintenance.

The different types of tourism emerging today, more and more linked to an experiential dimension, rely on those stratified cultures that have contributed in the design of these landscapes.

## **SOLANAS**

The workshop organised in September 2019 by the Politecnico di Milano (Dastu) and Politecnico di Torino (Dad) was focused on the small centre of Solanas, an administrative island under the municipality of Sinnai, part of the metropolitan city of Cagliari<sup>5</sup>. Sinnai, although with over seventeen thousand inhabitants, suffers from the centralising power of the metropolitan city due to its marginal position: this municipality is part of a territorial system historically connected more with the mountain than with the Campidano plain. Indeed, its history makes explicit its hinge role between the mountainous territories of Sarrabus and the sea. Solanas, compared to Sinnai, is in administrative discontinuity, as the dissolution of the *cussorge*<sup>6</sup> has resulted in fragmentation and redistribution of the property with the neighbouring municipality of Maracalagonis. Even Solanas, as previously described for the rest of the island, was characterised by a pastoral vocation linked to summer transhumance, and by agriculture with the cultivation of almond trees and vineyards. A few traces of this rural past still remain, although much has been erased by the arrival of the infrastructure and second homes along the coast.

5 / Part of these contributions have been selected and included inside a book being published in the next few months, between the end of 2020 and 2021, a work coordinated by professors Arturo Lanzani and Antonio De Rossi, curated by Silvia Lanteri, Davide Simoni and Valentina Rossella Zucca.

6 / It is a territorial organization system that managed the pasture right, handed down from father to son.

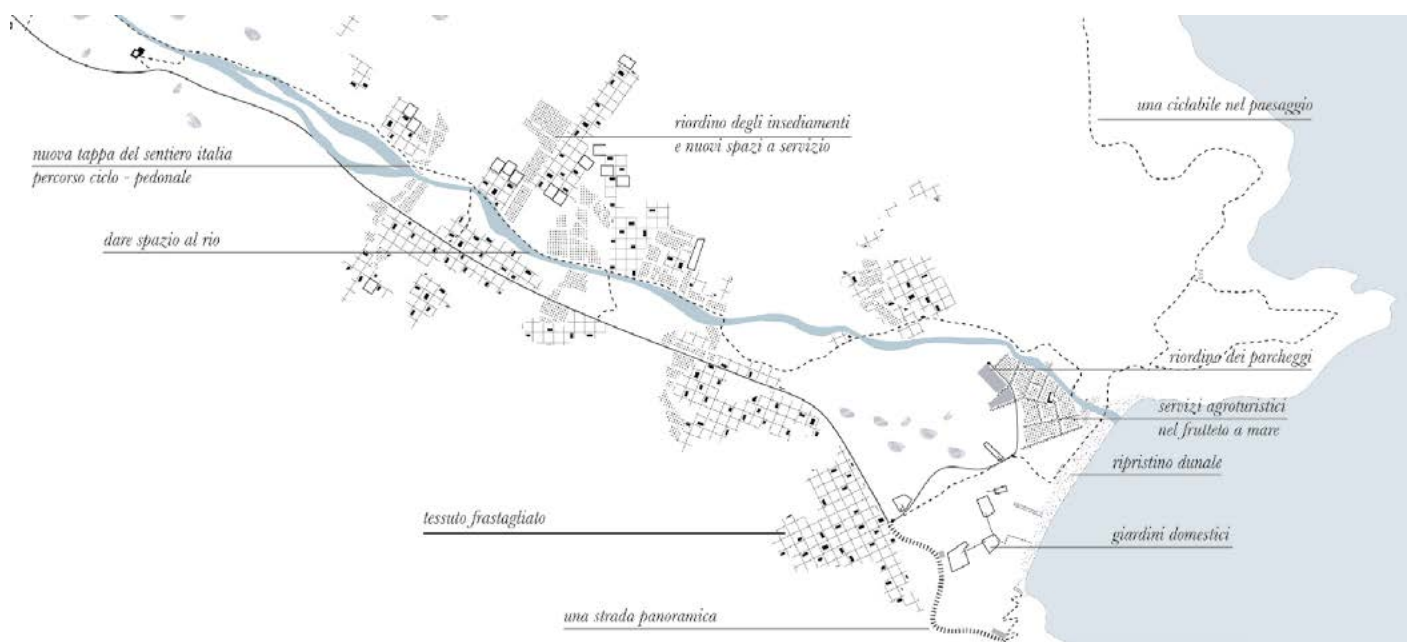


Fig. 2 / Structure scheme of the project proposals for Solanas. Source: Workshop TeMa (2019)

Resuming the words of Settis about the work of Pericoli (2019), here the landscape is like a known face, the mother tongue that resounds in our mind from childhood. In it every furrow, every tree, every stretch of water, every wall, every hill narrate millennia of human presence, absorbing its memory and reflecting it, going to constitute the traces of the palimpsest explored by Corboz in his writings (1985).

One of the main goals of the fieldwork carried out within the workshop, was to build a territorial-scale vision capable of disrupting the centralising power of the coast, putting the attention on the entire valley system, taking its ancient traces into account.

The settlement system of Solanas is mainly structured between the coastline and the littoral road, consisting of a dense fabric of single and two-family houses. Moreover, the coastal road played an important role in a monothematic reading of the territory, clearly dividing the settlement on the seaside from the one along the road that crosses the entire valley: along this road, a series of settlements has been organised in clusters according to a comb form, and they are all recognised under the toponym of Santa Barbara. The villas in this area have been built on pre-existing agricultural settlements, but these almond and olive groves' traces are now lost. The road remains on the old tracks connecting through a slight mountain range the territory of Castiadas. The construction of a new stretch of high-speed road in 2010<sup>7</sup> connecting the small centre to Cagliari and continuing towards Castiadas, changed some balances regarding the touristic flows, recreating that dozing connection perpendicular to the coastal path.

We need to reflect upon the role Solanas could possibly play in this context. Focusing exclusively on a type of tourism-oriented to the beach means to deal with all the other competitive centres around Villasimius and Costa Rei.

7 / Strada Statale 125 Orientale Sarda.

The first one, Villasimius, has a good system of hosting facilities and an offer of entertainment that has evolved over time, allowing this centre to establish itself among the most popular destinations along the south-western coast. In this sense, trying to compete with such realities means to risk in concentrating resources and energies to construct something that perhaps is not so exclusive. On the contrary, perhaps, the traces of rurality still present in the interstices left by the building, in the gardens of some villas and in the agro-pastoral activities show what would be interesting to invest on: an identity to be rediscovered, an important environmental matrix that would deserve to be enhanced and implemented.

## **FIVE IMAGES FOR A NEW VISION OF THE VALLEY**

The workshop, starting from the observation of a wider scale, considering Solanas in connection with Castiadas, tried to outline a new image for the future of the valley system, putting at the centre the environmental matrices of soil and water in relation to issues such as walkability, micro-production and the tourist offer.

The construction of this new possible imaginary is also fueled by the current debate on the ecological transition, also thanks to tools and policies such as those outlined by the UNESCO 2030 agenda.

The water of the river that reclaims its spaces, therefore, becomes an opportunity to redefine some margins and leave the right space to emptiness, ready to welcome a flood without danger. Moreover, the soils that still maintain an agricultural memory are an important environmental infrastructure to be extended and maintained.

On these two important elements, it is possible to construct some new narratives concerning the slowness of this landscape, of its routes and domestic/intimate living, that could be declined in several ways meeting a tourist demand.

### ***The last route of Sentiero Italia***

The "Sentiero Italia" is one of the longest hiking trails all over the world: it crosses the whole country, including Sardinia. The path juggles the western hills of the island, crossing Gallura, Ogliastra, Barbagia, and Sarrabus, up to Castiadas. One of the project explorations deriving from the workshop tries to retrace the old tracks, continuing the journey through the valley along the river direction and, if possible, climbing the hills up to some archaeological emergencies. It is a matter of bringing out traces surfacing this territory, such as the old routes of the charcoal burners and coalmen, the memory of a nuragic past and the paths for transhumance. A network made of old territorial trajectories and nodes, potentially reconnecting the inner valley to the beach. This emerging plot should necessarily interact with the surrounding – the Sette Fratelli park, the old prisons of Castiadas, the spaces of agro-pastoral

productions, the archaeological remains of the nuragic and romanesque periods – and in some cases it should indicate a reactivation of these elements. Moreover, it would be important to take into consideration the pastures' dimension that made the slopes of the hills particularly bare, with a consequent impoverishment of the soils: the dialogue with production companies could lead to synergies in order to reconstruct a landscape composed of terraces, pasture meadows shaded by the Mediterranean scrub and typical local crops. All materials that were part of a rural dictionary and that would help to restore and rediscovery the valley by inserting it into a strategy of the entire south-east quadrant of the island' slow re-infrastructure.

### ***The shape of the creek***

The natural infrastructure was an element taken into consideration too. Indeed, a first geographical reading underlined how the Rio Solanas water system, which runs through the entire valley and flows into the sea, is made of the granite batholith<sup>8</sup> of the Sette Fratelli massif. The awareness of this strong link between the inner valley and the beach was a fundamental point for our reflection. The permeable subsoil makes Rio Solanas generally visible only during the rainy seasons, but lately, with the intensification of events, even in summer, with the tourists becoming aware of its presence, even if often replaced by walkways and buildings. Here the reflection should deal with the torrential nature of this in some ways invisible network, supporting its variable character, making room for it. Therefore, it would be interesting to work on the thickness of the river, dilating and redesigning it through terracing and planting. A redesign of the water margin, an integration with the fabric, on the one hand regaining some of the denied spaces, on the other constituting the occasion for the introduction of new places for the community. An operation of this type means to consider the fate of the houses built too close to the watercourse, working on the interaction of different elements: the natural infrastructure of the river permeating the space, the hard infrastructure of the road giving access to the valley, that system of wide-ranging paths inserting it into a network of slow latent connections, the redesign of the banks with orchards that intersect the inhabited system redesigning enclosures.

Imagining an intervention of this type means questioning the "beach-centric" character proper of Solanas, providing a new quality of the space for its inner fringes.

### ***Domestic gardens***

By entering towards the coastal area, following the streets of the inhabited centre, it is possible to see private gardens characterised by strong care. Not only the well-known image of second houses for holidays, with a green flat lawn and deckchairs spread around, but a hybrid space that recalls some elements of the Mediterranean gardens made of pergolas, fruit trees and the bushes' gentle domestication. This level of care is probably the result of the owners' temporary but constant way of living these places, going there even on the weekend for the maintenance of their gardens. The traces of some fruit trees

8 / The formation of the coastal sedimentation in the southern area of Sardinia took place thanks to the erosion processes concerning the granite rocks of the internal mountains.

and some vegetable garden in the lower part of the settlement suggest the resistance of a way of living typical of these places, an intermittent and resilient living also linked to a family micro-production dimension. Clear examples of this phenomenon are some almond groves still present inside the private yards. These gardens with domestic features became an important urban material in these contexts, spontaneously grown, driven by the individual due to the absence of an overall plan.

The recognition of these elements could suggest a reconsideration of some voids present in between the urban fabric, converting them into intimate gardens maintainable by the inhabitants as new precious commons. The topography plays an important role in defining these spaces, whose tracing becomes design matter, articulated in terraces and retaining walls. In the case of the lower settlement, these home gardens could be considered structuring both to rearrange the existing ones, and to organise the few new buildings that the Urban Plan still allows, outside the 300 meters from the coast bound as defined by the P.P.R. (Regional Landscape Plan).

Moreover, the construction of these planted terraces could restore a sense of urbanity that has been denied during the last decades, without distorting that rural feature that still emerges albeit timidly. It would consist of a soil's design taming some steep sections with terracing systems, the use of scrub and orchards helping to define a general structure.

### ***An orchard by the sea***

Moving to the sea, Solanas beach can be divided into three sectors: the part of the cliff with its back made of houses clinging to the vertical ground. The central part, where the beachfront houses' fences follow one another, characterised by a system of small alleys organised according to a comb form reaching the sea. The eastern part, known by the toponym of Crazieranu, intercepting the river delta; behind this stretch to the east, an orchard and the remains of a farm still persist beyond the parking plate. Over the years, several proposals for tourist enhancement were elaborated, the last one in particular that (fortunately) have not been realised<sup>9</sup>. The agricultural settlement represents a peculiar feature, very hard to find on other coast's fragments: the intersection eucalyptus rows, a distinctive feature of the reclamation projects of the 1950s, designs a system of rooms occupied by citrus groves and meadows.

Stronger cooperation between public and private actors could provide new access to the sea keeping the shade of those rows, moving the parking lots now pressing the dune system and the lamination tank of Rio Solanas, avoiding part of the problems that today affect the natural system of the place.

Until today, the fate of this space is not yet known, especially due to the continuous change in the regional government that, regardless of its various political alignments, tries to take possession of the PPR (landscape plan), which recognised along the Sardinian coasts inalienable commons to preserve.

<sup>9</sup> / This latest proposal presented a massive volumetric increase for the conversion of the old rural building into an accommodation facility.





### **A cycle path along the waterfront**

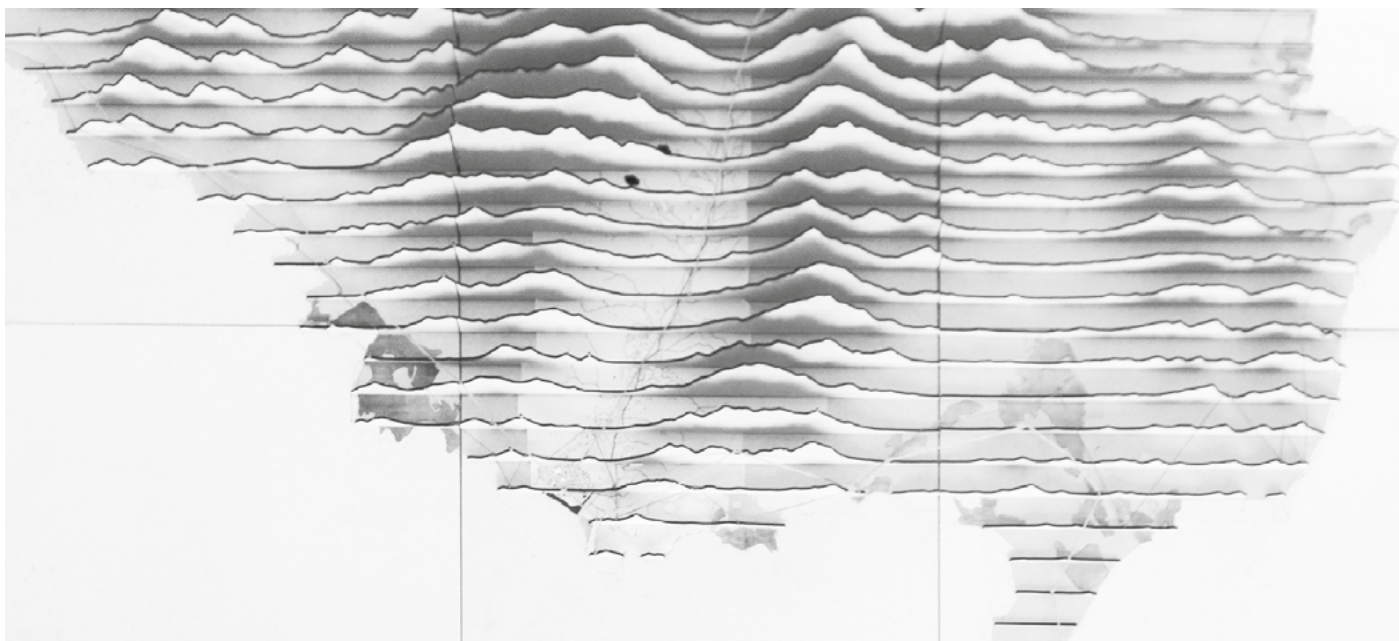
The Sardinia cycle project, currently underway, aims to implement a mobility plan focused on the use of bicycles, identifying a series of itineraries in order to create a cycling infrastructure. The Cagliari-Villasimius line will also intersect Solanas, relying entirely on the already existing coastal car axis, with an integration of the road section. In recent years, the construction of the internal high-speed road reduced the coastal road capability, allowing the transformation of the latter, integrating it with a new slow mobility system. However, how to design it? An ambitious project would be encouraging to move away from the existing roadway as much as possible, giving new relevance to the intersections with small centres. Moving from Solanas western entrance, the design exploration carried out during the workshop would intervene on the road with a strongly panoramic character, redesigning its section and imagining new accesses to the village, and then continuing passing inside the town along with one of the main streets and going towards Villasimius.

The cycle path that enters the inhabited centre becomes an occasion for some redevelopment works, also assuming a territorial relevance by connecting villages and towns, and allowing their slow discovery in relationship with the sea.

## **NEW IMAGINARIES AND NEW NARRATIONS**

Quoting Teti (2004), landscapes are anthropic constructs, with their own history sometimes difficult to be deciphered, their own life: they are born, they change, they are modified, sometimes they may even die, abandoned, and then reborn. Borrowing Corboz's words (1985), it is not enough to define the landscape as the result of a set of more or less coordinated processes located within a geo-

*Fig. 3 / View of the valley towards the sea. Source: Workshop TeMa (2019)*



*Fig. 4 / Working maquette elaborated during the workshop. Source: Workshop TeMa (2019)*

climatic dimension, but, as we saw describing the Sardinian territory processes of transformation, these are complex anthropisation processes too. When a population occupies certain places – either through a light relationship, such as in small agro-pastoral productions, or a heavy one, with the extraction of minerals or the dispossession of the coast in order to increase its tourist vocation – an organisational planning relationship is established, and the mutual effects of this coexistence can be observed. It oscillates between a material dimension of space modification – through the valleys, coasts and hinterlands infrastructure, the colonisation of territories once “discharged” of the human presence – but also immaterial, with a transformation of the economy and local production, which in turn have a strong impact not only on the practices investing this territory, but on the material construction of the landscape itself. In other words, the territory is, in fact, an object of construction, a sort of artefact, the product resulting from the interweaving of all these dimensions.

Proposing new imaginaries for these territories in a tension between inner areas and the coast – as we tried to do within this fieldwork experience, reinterpreting the territory by crossing an observation from above with glances from within – means to build possible worlds, which do not exist yet (Lanzani, 2011). Nevertheless, since the form of the landscape is the result of intertwined signs telling a geological and human history, this image brings some fluidity, it is composed of the essence in mutation, made of times, spaces, flows. Its material dimension alludes to a possible becoming, as it recalls a long-lasting past process of sedimentation and stratification of practices. The landscape itself shows a series of possibilities feeding and redefining themselves in this plurality of materials inherited from the past, a series of traces which if observed closely reveal themselves as bugs, circumstantial paradigms, deposits of hidden meaning (Ginzburg, 1979). They can and even must orient a design image towards the construction of new imaginaries and narratives.

Quoting Corboz (1985) again, the patient deciphering of the links between walkways, parcelling of the landscape and their geological substrate is fundamental in this process of interpretation of the territory. The result is a completely reoriented reading of the territory, which tries to identify the traces of disappeared territorial processes still present nowadays, in order to define possible lines of transformation. The territory that emerges from this story, overloaded with traces and infinite possible readings from the past, recalls the concept of palimpsest. To modify it, to intervene on it by exploiting certain fragments, it is often essential to irreversibly modify its substance. But the territory is not a consumer product that can be distorted or replaced: the value of each territory lies in its uniqueness, in its stratification of signs and practices, and intervening on this complexity implies the need to recycle its ancient signs, to “scratch” – as Corboz says – selectively the soil to reorient its transformations by tracing new furrows and superimposing new layers.

New imaginaries and new narratives can give these tourism-oriented coastal territories the opportunity to re-establish slumbering relationships with inner areas, rebalancing the relationships that nowadays intensify the fragility of both. They can constitute the possibility for different populations to establish work activities, encouraging the protection and care of the historical and natural heritage, trying to direct the tourist offer from a mere consumption of the landscape asset towards the enhancement of its material and immaterial potential.

Indeed, as underlined by De Rossi (2018), after years of strong distinction between “center” and “margin” it is important to question this dichotomy, assuming the idea that “inverting the gaze” is a fundamental passage in order to change the perception of these places, moving to the idea that these territories could be seen as new opportunities for the development of our country, containers of values from the past able to give back new meanings.

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