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URBAN CHANGE – GAGLIATO

The Future Story of a Calabrian Hill Town

Introduction

This Story from Practice begins at the end of the chapter in this book “A Creative ‘NanoTown’: Framing Sustainable Development Scenarios with Local People in Calabria, Italy” (Chapter II.2). The successful outcome of this international event created momentum to continue the project with more defined physical development and regeneration proposals for the town. The first “catalytic” week-long workshop in Gagliato, in the summer of 2017, combined with the NanoGagliato festival involved a large team of regeneration and development professionals, academics, master’s students in architecture, urban design, planning, local development, sociology and economics and local people in the town.¹ The next phase of the project, described in this story builds on the outcomes and policy recommendations of the first workshop; understanding that the complex issues, the time needed, the scope and the messiness of sustainable development processes need to cut across disciplinary and professional boundaries with practical and academic knowledges to be in any way effective or initiate change.

FIGURE III.4.1 Children in the medieval Borgo. Photo by Prue Chiles.

The Town

The small-town settlement of Gagliato is at an altitude of 450 metres with a population of just 500 inhabitants. The town and surrounding area have seen a steady population decline particularly since the 1950s, suffering in part due to the global phenomenon of rural–urban migration and emigration, mainly to Canada. The town’s remoteness is heightened by the beautiful rugged mountainous terrain.

Like hundreds of other small towns throughout the South of Italy, Gagliato has struggled economically for many hundreds of years. With both Greek and Roman remains and a mediaeval core (Figure III.4.1), Gagliato is situated in the province of Catanzaro, ten kilometres from the Ionian coast in the region of Calabria. Henry Swinborne in his travels in the two Sicilies in 1777 said – “*matters are not yet in so desperate a situation, as to preclude all possibility of restoring these provinces to a state of opulence and populousness.*”² This could still be an aspiration today, but for the pervasiveness of organised crime, namely the Ndrangheta’ and many other national Italian political factors that continue to thwart prosperity in Calabria generally. This first lesson on Calabrian history was told to us in a taxi coming from the airport on our first visit.

The Project and the Players

Co-ordinating and preparing the work, and authors of this story, are a team from Newcastle University, architects who attended the first workshop. We embarked on a year-long “live” research and design project culminating in a *framework document for future growth* with proposals and visualisations for the town to use in their funding bid to initiate a regeneration project in the town. A number of people were central to the project, firstly Giovanni Sinopoli, a surveyor/geometer, is the font of all knowledge on Gagliato, especially on the physical buildings and structures in the town. Giovanni works closely with the town, the mayor and the US scientists and philanthropists, led by Paola and Mauro Ferrari, who all jointly founded in 2008 the academy of Gagliato and the highly successful annual nano-technology conference NanoGagliato.³ It was Giovanni who put together the bid to the regional government. Paola organises and inspires many of the projects that take place in the town for one week in July, including the educational non-governmental organisation NanoPiccola, which aims to raise interest in science and technology subjects in schools in the area and in turn create more scientists, and the townspeople and their local expert knowledge themselves, are full of ideas and highly proactive in shaping their future.⁴ Giulio Verdini of Westminster University has also continued to participate and contribute to the project as well as diverse enabling partners, the residents of Gagliato.

Coming from conversations and feedback with the residents, the brief for this next part of the project was to build on the themes from the first workshop with more tangible proposals.

Five interdisciplinary groups in the initial workshop had explored themes of children and education, skills and creativity, science (a town of nano-technology) and art and well-being, through dialogue and participatory sessions, with both adults and children of the town.

The five groups then presented their ideas to the whole town at the town hall, and then to the Calabrian regional government at the huge new regional government building outside Catanzaro, the capital of the Calabrian region.

Our second visit, at the end of November 2017, found a very different place; quiet and chilly. At this point, we had worked on the project Gagliato for nine months,⁵ researching the region, cultural history, politics, industry and demographics to build on the themes from the summer workshop.

However, much of the research was carried out from the UK, thus being in Gagliato again was paramount to really understand its context and atmosphere. We agreed with all the partners that a series of short, mid- and long-term projects for the town was a useful way forward. Paola Ferrari of NanoGagliato joined us and was an invaluable translator and facilitator for us. Language could be an issue with the residents on a day-to-day basis but, through perseverance, visual props and being teased from time to time we built a comfortable relationship with the townsfolk.

The most significant aspect of this visit was a meeting with the whole community of Gagliato, including the mayor, in which the discussion was passionate, involved and helpful. The local people were keen throughout to highlight the things that would create the most impact for them, although the mayor at that time was often a little difficult to read, raising doubts over whether the town hall was really behind the project. Nonetheless, the proposals which followed were based on the aspirations of Gagliato's inhabitants, as well as aligning with the values of NanoGagliato. We departed a few days later after a number of planned sessions, discussions and anecdotal chats with a clearer idea of the projects that seemed popular and feasible, but perhaps more confused as to how we should prioritise them.

The most pressing purpose of the work now was to provide visual material and urban and architectural outline ideas, proposals and visions for the application to the regional government for funding. So the study developed into a fully illustrated feasibility study, splitting the proposals into three sections. Some of the short-term proposals could be implemented immediately, and others will take more planning, legal permission and substantial funding. The short-term ideas prioritised potential art and design competitions for decorative balconies and public staircases.⁶ “Colouring the town” captured many comments and suggestions, prioritising painting and rendering buildings in specific colours and how this might affect the appearance and image of the town. Although not contributing to the key challenges of depopulation and lack of opportunity in the town, it was acknowledged by all that the physical appearance and possibility of more tourism were key “quick wins.”

There was an emphasis on looking at longer-term strategies, including various new tourism and education projects as well as new micro-industries centred around local produce and agriculture, inspired or tested through the NanoGagliato initiatives. Tackling the abandonment of the lower town – *the borgo* – and its renovation became the most vital and critical project in the mid- to longer term (Figure III.4.2). These proposals included ideas for opening up the public realm around the Church.

The third visit, in late July 2018, at the end of the NanoGagliato 2018 week, was quite an awakening. Emma, James and Rob, now qualified and taking time out of their “day jobs” in the UK presented their work, and their report at another town meeting at the end of the festival, organised again by Paola and Giovanni and Giulio Verдини as well. The event was well attended by local residents, NanoGagliato participant scientists and other interested parties, including a representative from UNESCO. Comments came thick and fast from passionate members of the community – a teacher and deputy mayor's wife, who always contributed with great ideas was excited about just getting on with it. Others talked about various things they either liked or were not sure of. Mauro Ferrari reminded us that the very core of NanoGagliato and the future of the town was the encouragement of science, which was paramount, and that it was becoming eroded by more “cosmetic” improvements. Many of us felt, however, that it is through the implementation of short-term practical proposals that ownership within the town will increase, and so this was hard to hear.

A long-term ambitious plan the NanoGagliato team have been working on, the Accademia di Gagliato headquarters, is based in the lower part of the town in the mediaeval *borgo*, in a partially

FIGURE III.4.2 Collage showing ideas for opening up the public realm around the church. Authors: Rob Wills, Emma Kingman, James Anderson.

FIGURE III.4.3 The new Frantoio Building, a new headquarters for NanoGagliato. Authors: Rob Wills, Emma Kingman, James Anderson.

FIGURE III.4.4 The existing entrance to medieval Borgo. Photo by Rob Wills, Emma Kingman, James Anderson.

FIGURE III.4.5 The proposed entrance to medieval Borgo. Authors: Rob Wills, Emma Kingman, James Anderson.

built Frantoio building (Figure III.4.3). This has a dramatic expressed concrete roof, designed by an artist. When finished this building will form part of a “Learning Campus” for the Town. This will oversee the planning of the annual NanoGagliato events, as well as forming a separate non-profit organisation called NanoPiccola, which intends to implement and disseminate science and technology learning amongst children in the area. Here also, newly regenerated homes in the borgo will share space with new local economic ventures and services to meet the demands of Gagliato’s expanding role as “Town of the NanoSciences.” This would also support and generate ideas for local and regional agriculture and locally grown produce, where green spaces around the town could be utilised to grow crops – oregano being a central component in these research and experimental plans. Our proposals were asked to consider these in a wider plan for the *borgo* and how this might form public space (Figure III.4.4 and Figure III.4.5).

Over three visits, we were just beginning to understand how interdependent Gagliato is, and should be, within the region. It must be part of a system or network of towns, using regional assets and publicising this; not competing but collaborating and celebrating similarities and diversity. When we visited neighbouring towns we witnessed and heard of exciting initiatives and new enterprises. The value of culture was beautifully illustrated in Cosenza, for example, where the remarkably intact city centre, is supported to retain historic cafes and artisanal shops, such as violin and lace makers. Art, as in classical times, abounds in the city. Around the Duomo, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, an extraordinary figure of a woman tells of the under-represented role of women in the city. The notable buildings all have information boards outside with plans and sections of the buildings – suggesting an architectural literacy with which most people are comfortable, both local and visitor. Badolato, a small picturesque hill town, half an hour away from Gagliato, has an inspirational mayor who was one of the first to give empty properties to immigrant residents who want to renovate a property to encourage them to stay in the area.

We also looked for examples of good ideas for regeneration from different countries, and these have been included in the final feasibility study as the next participatory tool with which to work with the community. We learned almost everything from local knowledge wherever we were, whether walking around the town, visiting a church or at a town meeting. We met local people and families visiting family from Canada. We learned from other disciplines, particularly about invisible things. One woman doctor, part of the nanoscience community, who now owns a house in the town, treated some women who needed medical attention and this opened a tinderbox about the number of women carers in the town, who were not able to get out much and were invisible.

Challenges of the Project

For us, this was a transdisciplinary project at all stages, as the complex issues and challenges were thought about from the different perspectives of the many partners in a collaborative and participatory and sometimes conflicting way. Thinking about the successes of the project, it was clear that the differences between all the partners, as well as the similarities, affected the success of the discussion of the best directions for the development of the town.

The aspects of the project that were most successful surrounded the relationships built with the people of the town and the momentum and the growing “buy-in” of the townspeople and our partners. The embedded actions and long-term presence of the NanoGagliato initiative have empowered the town and made our work easier. The townspeople are open to change. The best way of working with the town was by being present; working with local people, being helpful and

FIGURE III.4.6 Gagliato, Experimental town. Authors: Emily Charlton and Toghrul Mammadov.

collaborative. We used the “process of design” and the power of the visual image to discuss and to challenge. We brought an aesthetic vision into the everyday, by prioritising the history, culture and art practice of the place. An aesthetic sensibility involved, for us, attributing meanings to form, and we found that this did not pertain to any “social class.” Art is perceived as a “means of distinction”⁷ and everyone can buy into that.

Our aim was to participate, to ask the right questions and keep everyone onside; acting as curators, researchers and collators of ideas. Only then could we generate proposals. Our methods needed to be congruent with the lived experience of the townsfolk and be part of the narrative of everyday lives, for proposals to be relevant enough to create change in the future. It was the design images that became one part of the bid to the regional government for “seedcorn” regeneration funding for the Lower town Borgo. “Before and after” photomontages, were the most popular drawings, they allowed everyone a glimpse into the future, to see a view, albeit altered, that they recognise. For example, on one proposal we made, the town liked it, but to alter a disused part of the church externally, we were gently reminded that we would need permission from the Vatican, which might take some time, and maybe that should not be a priority. The three visits allowed us to make mistakes, to do things more than once and tolerate different readings from different disciplines and directions. However, it is still difficult to get people to be critical and to comment. The important thing we felt was to keep the report open and useable and not fixed or finished. When a document is finished and looks “polished” it is difficult to comment. However, the importance of visualisations, of drawings and collages cannot be over-estimated.

The challenge of working with artists or scientists with completely different ways of working and cultural backgrounds is a challenge and needs a careful disentangling of power structures. We were, however, all looking at the future development of Gagliato by looking at the past context and the possibilities this gave us, or at new production from future possibilities of science and technology and art. The two can make a powerful cooperation.

The next stage of the project which started in February 2020 is working on a more concrete proposal to develop Gagliato as an “experimental town,” with an aspiration in the future of creating an architectural “demonstration project” looking at different ways to restore or repair or rebuild empty and abandoned properties.

Notes

- 1 Chapter II.2 of this book, written by Giulio Verdini et al., describes in greater detail the relationships and issues encountered in Gagliato.
- 2 From *Calabria, the Other Italy* by Karen Haid, p. 140. Calabria is described as the other Sicily.
- 3 NanoGagliato (www.nanogagliato.com).
- 4 Multiple funding sources for the project came from the Gagliato Town Council, the NanoGagliato non-governmental organisation, Intrepid – a European Union COST grant looking at interdisciplinary working – and Newcastle University.
- 5 This started as a “linked research” final year (5th/6th year) architecture project at Newcastle University School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape that ran alongside their thesis projects and is a design research project in which a member of staff is involved. These are popular, as they are live projects in communities that require agency and application to real-world issues and solutions. This is borne out by the fact that the students carried on after they had finished university as newly qualified architects.
- 6 For example, one of our collaborators in the first workshop, the School of Architecture at the University of Calabria, helped the town put on a competition to paint one of the characteristic flights of steps, and students and residents from the town actually painted the winning design in summer 2018.
- 7 Bourdieu in *Distinction*, 1984 – in the *Modes of Appropriation* chapter p.264.