Radicarsi

being rooted

in the layers of the ground



AR3A010 Research Plan
Adele Maria Saita

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in the layers of the ground

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0. Introduction

Radicarsi.[1]

Sinking into the ground,
spreading one's fingers until they embrace the earth,
clutching it until they guard it, exchanging secrets,
becoming each other's guardians;
this is how I imagine the sense of rootedness to a place.

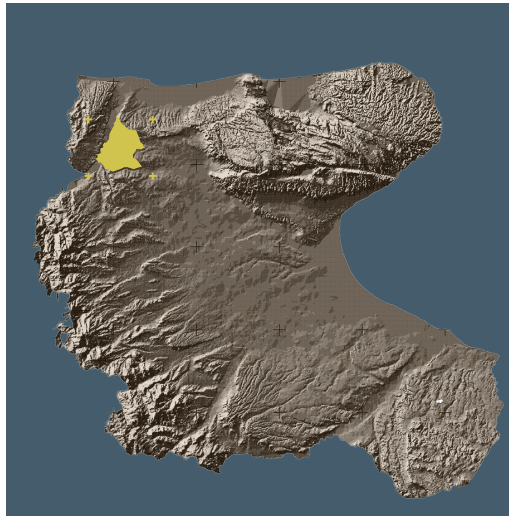
A feeling I can only ever imagine because I am part of that ever-growing group of people who find themselves between cultures, torn between opposite poles of the globe. A generation at times lost, at times freed from the burden and anchor of their roots. Yet whether we deny them or embrace them, our roots provide us with the tools to investigate the layers of our existence, whether it is physical, geographical, or cultural.

Drown by this investigation I found San Paolo di Civitate, a village in the Apulian countryside that has been, in the words of many citizens: "Forgotten by God." [Fig.1]

Forgotten, erased, extinct— these are the specters that loom over a small rural town, like many others in Italy and the world, which are in danger of disappearing. San Paolo is part of a southern Italian area that for generations has suffered from economic and territorial mismanagement, as well as natural disasters like earthquakes, floods, and fires. It has been further weakened by the lack of job opportunities, infrastructure, and services, and ultimately, by demographic decline and abandonment. However, too often we think of these places only in terms of abandonment, doomed to become ghost towns, losing sight of what still endures.

My research begins here, with the identity of a town in an ordinary place, unknown to most, but that still carries a knowledge that can help us re-think layers of the landscape that have lost their old meaning. It begins with the stories of its human and non-human[2] inhabitants and their relation to the land, the soil, and every inhabited surface; in order to continue guaranteeing the right to inhabit; to re-think social and community spaces. An attempt, for all the new generations not just only the ones that grow up there, to have at the very least the chance to decide where they can grow their roots.





[Fig.1] Above, contextual map: on the left is underlined the region of Apulia; on the right is underlined in yellow the municipality of San Paolo di Civitate. By the author.

[1] Italian for "To be grounded in a place".
[2] For non-humans I refer to the place's flora and fauna.

1. Problem statement and research question(s)

"No one believed in this land.
Parents were pushing their children to leave for a better future,
and this ensured that nothing was built over the years"[3]





[Fig.2 Serafina's interview. By the author.]

Begins Serafina during my interview. [Fig.2] Serafina is 72-year-old entrepreneur who has lived between San Paolo di Civitate and Milan. With her words, Serafina captures the sentiment of a town struggling to escape its provisional existence—a place seen and experienced as transitory, where neither faith nor opportunity exists for putting down roots. A place whose roots seem to have lost their grip on the land, a place disconnected from the social, economic, and cultural system from which it once drew sustenance. But what is it that has failed?

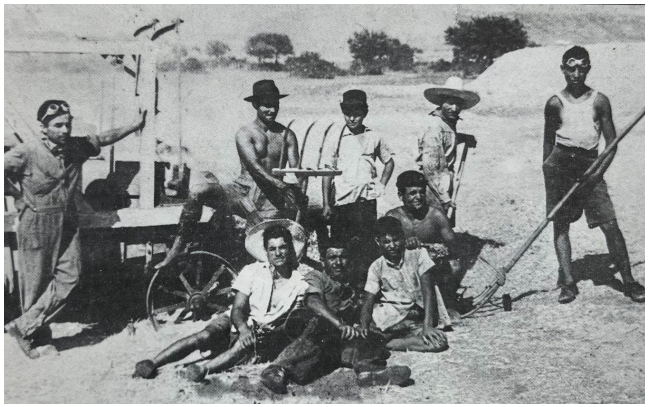
[3] Nessuno ha creduto in questa terra. I genitori spingevano i figli ad andare via per un futuro migliore e questo ha fatto in modo che negli anni non si costruisse niente." (Original version, translated by the author)

Towns like San Paolo di Civitate are part of the so-called 'Inner Areas,' meaning those Italian towns in the mountains, hills, and plains located far away from major urban centers. These areas have developed a symbiotic relationship with the ground, intertwining their culture, identity, and economy with pastoral or agricultural activities. [Fig.3] Due to this interconnection, every crisis in the sectors has been mirrored by a crisis in the community and the beginning of many migratory waves that have weakened the social and cultural fabric of most rural areas of southern Italy (Teti, 2022).

Although the town's history has been marked by waves of farmers migrating abroad for better opportunities, the most significant migration began in the 1950s with the industrial boom in northern Italy; with the rise of industry, agriculture lost its grip on the country's economic prospects and the identity that once formed the community fractured (Tantillo, 2023). This led to a demographic decline and general abandonment, that resulted in empty streets, squares, houses; shops and public buildings being closed. [Fig.4] In addition to this crisis, the Italian researcher Filippo Tantillo in his book "Italia Vuota" highlights the absence of the state that has worsened the – already troubled- economic and social fabric. The ongoing abandonment of 'Inner Areas' puts entire communities at even greater risk from the effects of the climate crisis[4] , which threatens the loss of an invaluable cultural and ecological heritage (Casavola, 2014).

[4] As reported by this newspaper, nowadays floodings are more often happening in the area. Article of La gazzetta del Mezzogiorno'. Accessed on October 25th, 2024, from https://www.lagazzettadelmezzogiorno.it/video/foggia/1536294/maltempo-nel-foggiano-il-vigile-del-fuoco-











[Fig.3] Archival images of San Paolo di Civitate in the 19th century.
Source: Associazione culturale Desaleo

[Fig.4] Below, San Paolo's demographic in the years from 1970 to 2024. The data are from ISTAT. By the author.

1970

6215 6096 6049 5931

5905 5857 5844 5818

5777 5740 5694 5669

2024

5597 5563 5457 5446

Returning to Serafina's words, San Paolo di Civitate is stuck in a temporary dimension because the old dynamics that were holding it together have fallen apart. The relationship with the countryside that has so profoundly shaped the town's identity has lost, for the majority of the citizens, its old meaning. Moreover, spaces such as theaters, cinemas, public libraries, communal ovens and wine cellars have closed down due to the ongoing exodus, leaving, even for the few remaining, with no space for cultural and social engagement, therefore losing connection, not only with the other citizens but with the urban pattern itself. The citizens have lost their physical and abstract connection with what I defined *terra*, a word that in Italian has the double meaning of soil, and hometown. I see this disconnection as the problem that I want to tackle with my design project: reconnect the people with their environment to create a "stable ground" where they can sink their roots, where they escape the temporary dimension and actively participate in the life of it.

To answer this problem the Italian anthropologist Vito Teti often uses the concept of *re-abitare*, italian for re-inhabiting, that is finding new ways to live in a place again; creating new dynamics, rethinking those places that have lost grip on the life of the citizens and finding a new role for them. For this reason, we must start from the terra, from its layers, to draw from the past and present knowledge that can inspire new ways of living. For the few remaining citizens and for those who would like a different option from the big urban centers, we should create places where people can sustain their traditions, socialize, and celebrate a terra that is still alive, therefore:

How the investigation of different layers of the *terra* can redefine spaces that have lost their old social meaning thus creating a town where people can sink their roots?

How can the repopulation of human and non-human architecturally coexist?

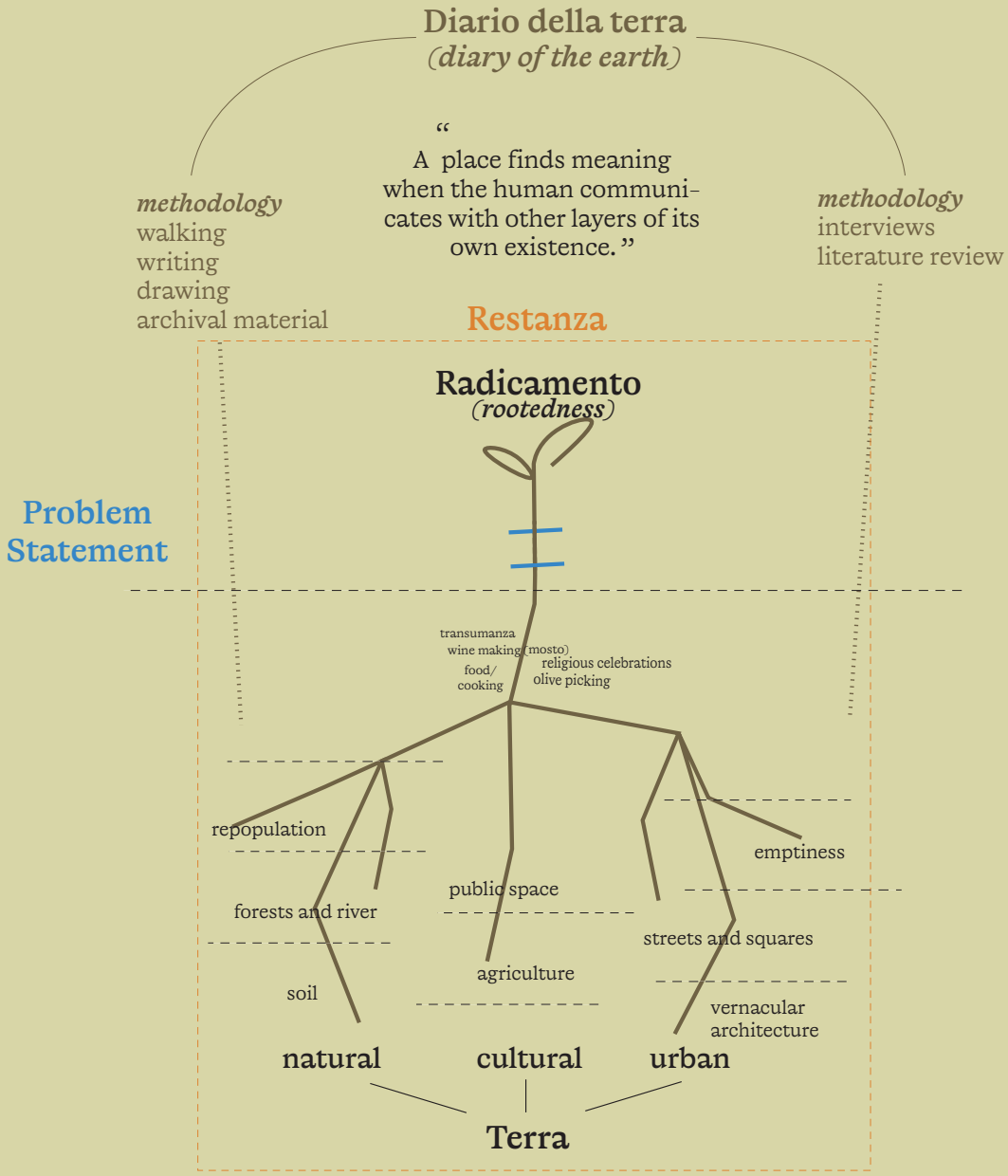
How can we rethink agricultural spaces to answer to the lack of social interaction and cohesiveness of the community?

How neglected cultural buildings can be re-design to openly engage with the streets and the squares?

How can architectural elements provide spaces for rituals and traditions of the ground (*terra*)?

2. Framework of research

I decided to set up my research using the metaphor of a plant that draws nourishment from different layers of the ground and with it I defined three concepts that I will explain better in upcoming chapters: ***terra***, italian for soil and hometown, is all the environment in its past, present, and future transformations which I investigated with three layers; ***radicamento***, italian for rootedness, is the set of rituals and traditions that make people socially interact with the environment; and ***restanza***, italian for restance and resistance, is re-inhabiting a place carrying the knowledge of the first two. This allowed me to understand San Paolo di Civitate as a system of social dynamics, layers of history, culture, and transformations that mix and inform one another. [Fig.5]



[Fig.5] On the right. The diagram that shows the framework of research. By the author.

Terra

The word *terra*, in Italian, conveys several meanings. It is understood to mean the entire globe, to refer to all landmasses emerging from the waters, to signify the ground beneath one's feet, and it is often used as a synonym for town (Treccani, unknown). [Fig.6] It is a word often accompanied by a tone of pride, sometimes with nostalgia, sometimes with anger: *Questa è la mia terra.*[5] It is a word I have frequently heard used in all possible meanings in the stories of *san paolesi*[6] , so much so that it led me to ask: "What do they mean? Are they talking about the soil? The countryside? The town?". Thus, in using the word terra, I understand it not only in its material dimension but as a bearer of history, transformations, and social relationships.

For this reason, I decided to adopt the division into layers formulated by Inge Bobbink and Saskia de Wit, the one conceiving the landscape (*terra*) as "accumulations of systems or treatments that have piled up and acted upon one another over time informed by a succession of functional-morphological transformations." (Bobbink, De Wit, 2006) They argued that every landscape has four layers: **natural**, **cultural**, **urban**, and architectural. For the sake of this research, I will focus on the first three, thinking of the fourth layer as the result of my design project. From these three layers I came up with questions that would help drive my design.

Moreover, understanding these layers and investigating them through the roots allowed me not to take any of their components for granted, paying equal attention to the past, present, and future as well as human and non-human inhabitants.



[Fig.6] Above, pictures of San Paolo di Civitate that describe the word *terra*. By Martina Trotta and the author.

[5] Italian for "This is my land".
[6] I will start referring to *san paolesi* as the citizens of San Paolo di Civitate.



1) Natural



2) Cultural



3) Urban

[Fig.7] Map of San Paolo di Civitate with the three layers. By the author.

The natural layer of *terra*, provides us with the biological and geological data of the landscape before human intervention (Bobbink, De Wit, 2006), helping us understand the original formation of the territory, its topography, and its non-human inhabitants.
San Paolo di Civitate extends across a hilly area overlooking the Tavoliere delle Puglie plain. The soil is composed of "coarse gravel and clay conglomerates" (Valente, 1984), which make it compact, impermeable, and therefore vulnerable to erosion (Rombai, 2001). In the past, erosion was mitigated by the vast forests that covered the hills and whose roots held the soil together. Nowadays, amid the climate crisis, the area is more vulnerable to flooding caused by the overflow of irrigation canals, which have dried up the Fortore River, and by deforestation driven by the spread of arable monocultures.

When discussing the territory of San Paolo, one often thinks of human depopulation, forgetting the depopulation of flora and fauna over the centuries. Human and non-human repopulation are goals that must go hand in hand, but more importantly, we must rethink how they can coexist, how human habitation can allow space for non-human life, and how this concept translates architecturally. Therefore:

how can the repopulation of human and non-human architecturally coexist?

[Fig.8] On the right, a map of San paolo di Civitate that shows the rivers and the few spots of forests. By the author.

Cultural – Rethinking the role of agricultural spaces

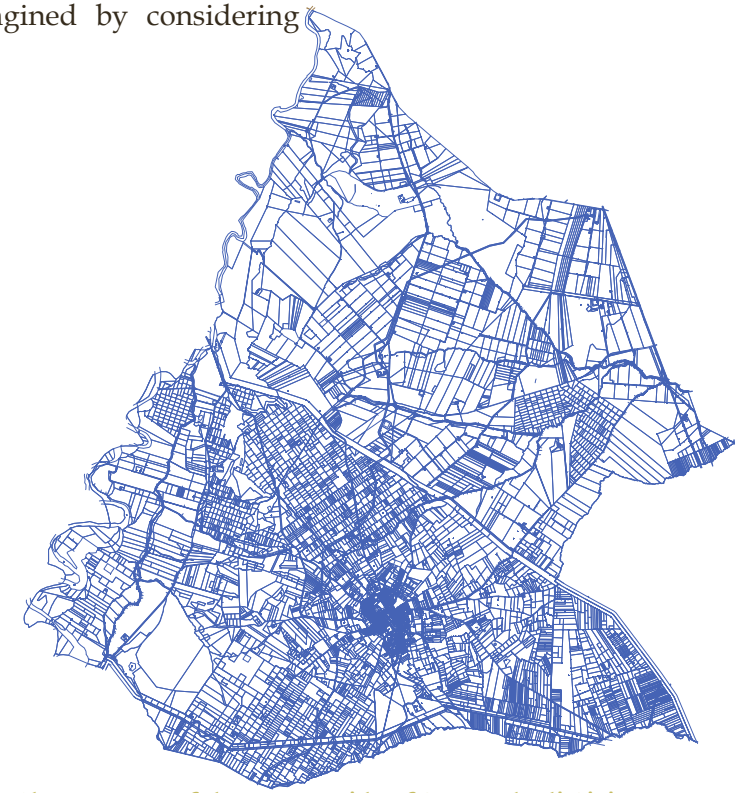
The second layer is the cultural one, representing human adaptation and modification, often seen in agricultural development and early settlements (Bobbink, De Wit, 2006). Agriculture emerged alongside human settlement and has continued to exist in a symbiotic relationship with its inhabitants, shaping the economic and social substrate.

The sense of belonging to San Paolo inevitably passes through this layer; the products of the countryside are present in the diet, the celebrations, and the traditions of the citizens on a personal level. This was highlighted by an observation from Michele, a 62-year-old architect from San Paolo: "Old farmers used to say that those who plant an olive tree do so not for their children but for their grandchildren, as the olive tree only begins to produce mature fruit when it is 40-50 years old."[7] This intergenerational care shows that agriculture, even a simple olive tree, connects to an intimate and familial sphere.

Yet agricultural life is no longer part of the daily experience for all the inhabitants of San Paolo. Only those who work as farmers still follow daily the rhythms and the places of the countryside, while most residents of San Paolo may still own a piece of land but have limited options: to use it for personal purposes, to delegate its maintenance to others, or to sell it. The countryside now is mostly characterized by private activities that inhibit both a physical and abstract connection, creating a barrier to exploration and re-appropriation of the land (Volpe, 2022). [Fig.9]

Agricultural spaces have to find a new role in community life, adapting to an: "ever-evolving social demand"[8] (Belligiano, 2010), and I believe this role can be reimagined by considering the countryside as a public place of social and cultural interaction.

This naturally raises the question: **How can we rethink agricultural spaces to answer to the lack of social interaction and cohesiveness of the community?**



[Fig.9] Above, a map of the countryside of San Paolo di Civitate. By the author.

[7] I vecchi contadini usavano dire che chi pianta un olivo lo fa non per propri i figli, ma per i nipoti, perché l'olivo comincia a produrre frutti maturi solo quando ha 40-50 anni" (Original version, translated by the author)

[8] Una domanda sociale in continua evoluzione." (Original version, translated by the author)

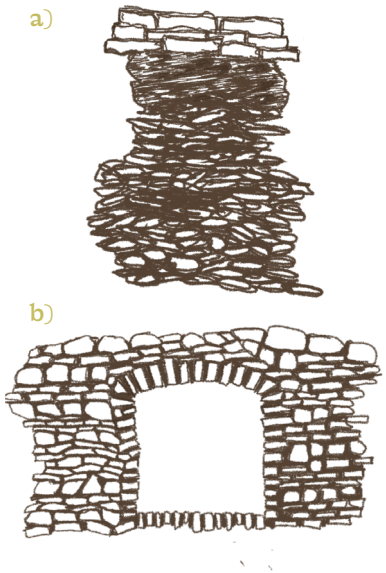
The urban layer represents the human intervention to accommodate growing urban needs, combining elements of the natural landscape with agricultural patterns and urban structures (Bobbink, De Wit, 2006). With the founding of the town of San Paolo, we witness a shift to a more compact urban layout, reflecting a transition in community life away from agriculture as the sole form of labor, while still maintaining a connection to it, evident in the materials and construction techniques of early architecture. The techniques used non-standardized materials like bricks, river stones, and rocks. This architectural tradition is part of the town's cultural heritage and thus deserves to be re-evaluated [Fig.10]

An urban element worth re-evaluating is the network of streets and squares, which form the backbone of small-town communities. Streets and squares were the quintessential social spaces, where both the ordinary and extraordinary moments, such as celebrations and local traditions, took place. [Fig.11] Yet, most of the streets, squares, shops, and houses are empty. It is a contradictory emptiness, representing on one hand an absence of people, relationships, and businesses, and on the other hand marked by the physical presence of abandoned lands in the countryside, deserted buildings, and vacant squares. Especially important are all those cultural buildings that once provided engaging recreational spaces in San Paolo, such as the two cinemas and the theatre that have closed down, and the public library and the museum whose structures are completely neglected.

Therefore: **How neglected cultural buildings can be re-designed to openly engage with the streets and the squares therefore to the town's social life?**

[7] I vecchi contadini usavano dire che chi pianta un olivo lo fa non per propri i figli, ma per i nipoti, perché l'olivo comincia a produrre frutti maturi solo quando ha 40-50 anni" (Original version, translated by the author)

[8] Una domanda sociale in continua evoluzione." (Original version, translated by the author)





[Fig.10a] Drawing of a down basement's wall, made with soil, clay bricks and stones from the river. By the author.
[Fig.10b] Drawing of a ruin the countryside, made with clay bricks and big stones. By the author.
[Fig.11] Map of the San Paolo. By the author.

Radicamento

Rootedness, as the Italian word *radicamento*, contains the word roots, since the act of binding oneself to a place means digging into the different layers of it. Moreover, Sakhaeifar and Ghoddusifar define this feeling as when "[...] the human communicates with other layers of its own existence." (Sakhaeifar & Ghoddusifar, 2016). I see the social dimension in which this interaction of layers takes place is in the rituals and celebrations tied to the terra, which Silvana del Carretto, in her book 'San Paolo di Civitate' (1997), defines as "an umbilical cord that binds us to those who have gone before us [...] (they are) the spirit of feeling and being sanpaolese."[9]
Rituals interact with the natural, cultural and urban layer. Activities such as the preparation of tomato sauce, olive oil, and wine begin in the countryside with the harvesting of raw materials but then spill into the streets, squares, and cellars, ending in both the countryside and the town with end-of-harvest celebrations. Similarly, religious celebrations, like processions, wind through the country alleys and into the little churches in the countryside.

Rituals create an invisible chain that binds the entire terra. They represent the meeting of rules and habits that have developed due to a given territory—they are what we call culture (Menon, 2019).

[9] Un cordone ombelicale che ci lega a coloro che ci hanno preceduto [...] (sono) lo spirito del sentire e dell'essere sanpaolesi" (Original version, translated by the author).



[Fig. 12] Above, pictures of San Paolo's traditions. By unkown authors.

Restanza

The word *restanza* in Italian means 'remnant', but it was evoked by Vito Teti in 2011 with a different meaning; it is "the attitude of those who, despite difficulties and driven by desire, remain in their homeland, with purposeful intentions and initiatives for renewal"[10] (Crusca, 2023). Restanza originates from the corresponding French restance (based on résistance) and is a cross between restance and resistance. Above all, restanza emphasizes the right to inhabit, meaning the right to continue to have social and cultural spaces and schools villages despite the decreasing number of inhabitants (Teti, 2022). Closing these spaces or viewing the few remaining inhabitants as if they were already ghosts would mean condemning entire communities to death. Anthropologist Anna Rizzo highlights how certain public spaces—schools, kindergartens, and public ovens—have been closed and repurposed as warehouses, leading to social harm and cultural impoverishment (Rizzo, 2023).

Restanza, then, is the lifeblood that connects radicamento and terra, setting out to investigate and understand, case by case, the history and geography of places and to encourage projects tailored to fit in. Restanza "[…] means knowing how to take on the memories, needs, and projects of those who have remained and intend to change and invent a new community. We need to be utopian and concrete."[11] (Teti, 2022)

[10] L'atteggiamento di chi, nonostante le difficoltà e sulla spinta del desiderio, resta nella propria terra d'origine, con intenti propositivi e iniziative di rinnovamento" (Original version, translated by the author).

[11] […] significa farsi carico delle memorie, dei bisogni, dei progetti di chi è rimasto ed intende cambiare e inventare una nuova comunità. Bisogna essere utopici e concreti." (Original version, translated by the author).

3. Methodology

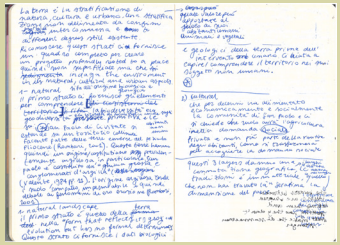
To structure my methodology, I used the literature of Vito Teti and other anthropologists who have been studying this topic. To make a meaningful project they advise starting with the stories of the citizens since in most small-town communities valuable knowledge is passed down orally. Teti also suggests walking as "[…] a way to penetrate the deep soul of a place instead of passing through it superficially" (Teti, 2022). To summarized: exploring the environment geographically, historically, and socially, drawing comparisons with similar realities that were able to achieve a positive outcome, and being grounded in the local pattern while re-thinking, and re-evaluating to adapt current problems.

[11] Un modo per penetrare l'anima profonda di un luogo invece di attraversarlo superficialmente" (Original version, translated by the author).

Interviews

Most of San Paolo knowledge is oral; these are stories passed down among families or fellow citizens, so I will use interviews as my main method.



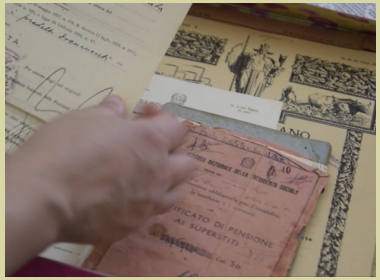


Writing

To understand the landscape, I will use writing as a method in order to connect with the stories of the both human and non-human citizens.

Archival Materials

I am already in contact with the cultural association DeSaleo that has done an incredible job of collecting photos, maps, and reports on the town from different eras. I will draw on their materials and knowledge.



[Fig. 13] Above and on the next page, pictures that show my methodology. By the author.

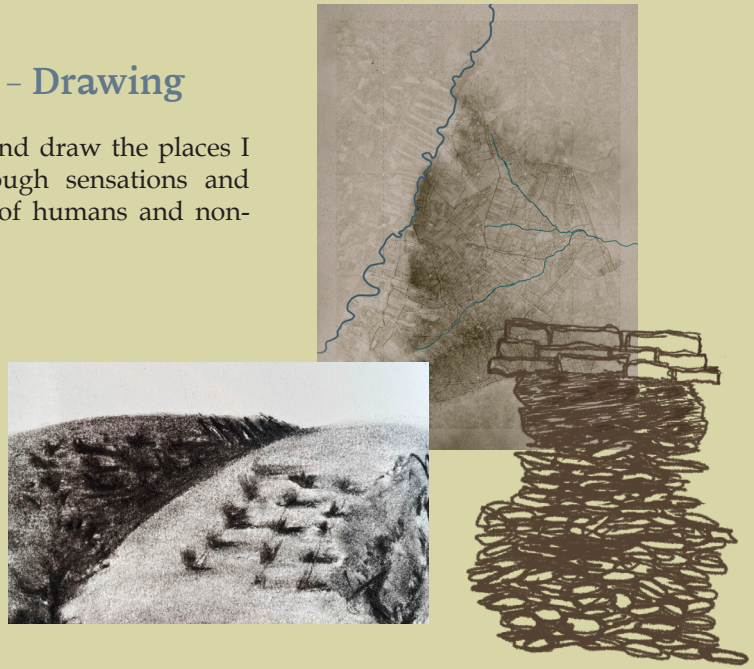


Literature Review

Despite the small community, I have found a large number of poems, novels, and diaries written by *san paolesi* about their town, therefore I will analyze this literature.

Walking - Drawing

I will map and draw the places I explore through sensations and encounters (of humans and non-humans).



Diary of *terra*

These stories will come together in a "Diary of the terra" that I will submit to my P2 in both Italian and English, as I hope to do with my research plan, so that I can then deliver my papers to the cultural association's archive that I mentioned.

The diary will have:

- A glossary, with the Italian-dialect words used to investigate of the dynamics hidden in the language.
- Stories of human and non- human citizens. Each story will be then rewritten (in order to put myself into the shoes of the characters) and mapped.
- Not just of pages: the diary will contain samples of materials and whatever object, texture, material will be useful for the research's aim.





[Fig. 14] Above, pictures from the graphic project: Recordari" The project aimed to collect memories of a home. by Barletta A., Indrio M., Razzano C., Sciancalepore R., Renzulli S.

4. Preliminary conclusion (initial design)

This research made me investigate San Paolo di Civitate and its citizens as a complex system of traditions, social relations and places. A system that can survive if it can innovate and adapt to the problems that threaten its fate. Setting up the research helped me come up with that following principles that will guide the decision of my site, the functions and the design.

Layers of terra

1. Even if the focus of my project are human users, especially with the environmental crisis undermining the stability of the ecology, is important to give enough focus on the flora and fauna of the place.

2. The countryside is such an important part of the town's identity and if could host another function apart from the agricultural activities, it will be the way to re-connecting it with the citizens.

3. The interventions in the urban part of the town should remember the importance of the streets and the squares and openly engage with them.

Radicamento

The concept of radicamento inspired me to consider how my design could incorporate functions that connect with the rituals and traditions of terra.

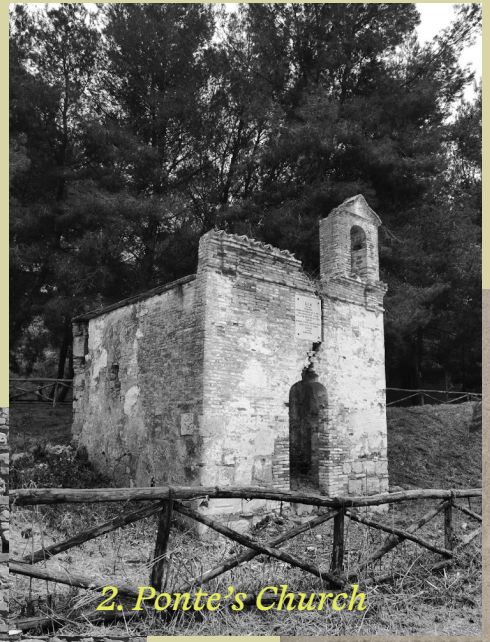
Restanza

Meanwhile, restanza represented the entire process of rethinking and re-evaluating all the layers— identifying which practices may no longer work and clarifying the new purposes they should serve.

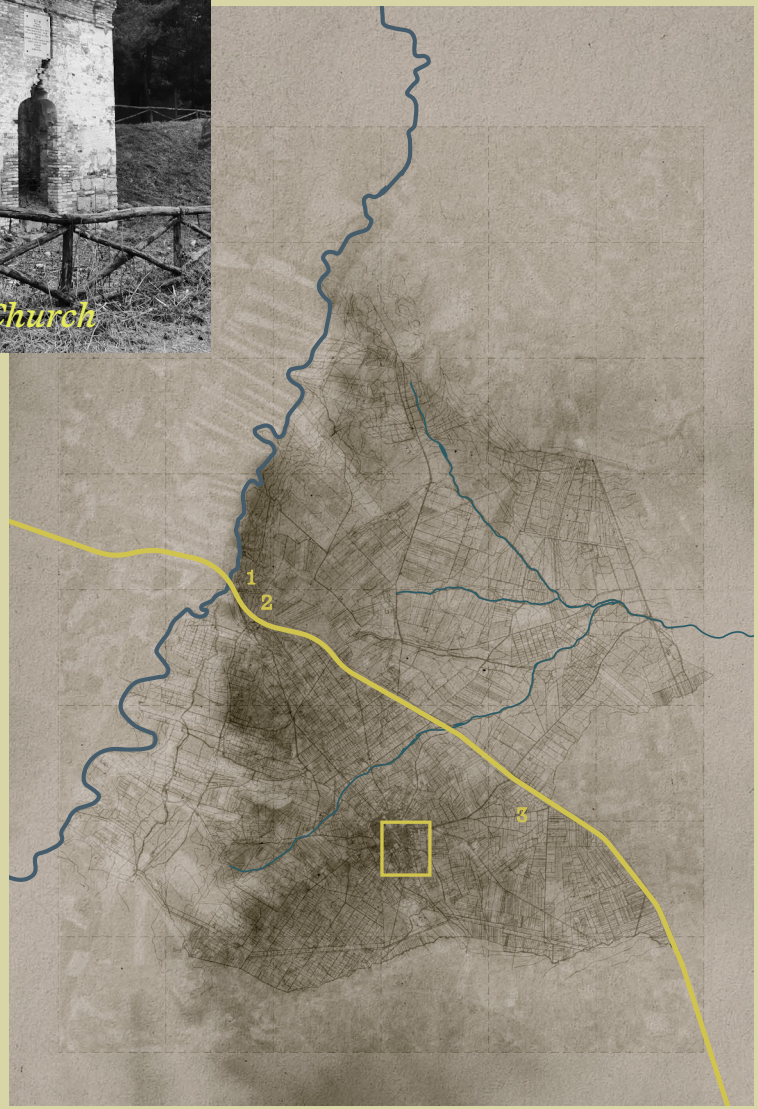
Therefore, moving to my design proposal, the main goal of my project will be to provide communal spaces in the countryside linked to the rituals of terra such as a communal oven, wine cellar or kitchen. I imagined these spaces arranged in a path, therefore, creating a physical connection that could foster slow mobility and help the new or old citizens (maybe even a conscious tourism) explore the value of their terra. I would like to use the path of the *Tratturo Magno* as a case study and maybe a possible site. This path was once a vital economic and cultural artery, and I would like to study how to reactivate the route and the buildings, now in ruins, that once were part of it. I also found the vernacular construction technique consisting of clay bricks mixed with stones, to be very interesting, and I would like to understand how it could be utilized in my project.

In conclusion, I focused my research on the citizens that are there or the ones that have already a relationship with the town and therefore want to come back, and I did that because I think is the starting point to perhaps attract other residents. However, I do not want to overlook the eventuality that hangs over the fate of the town, the abandonment, and I would like to keep in mind this layer to better investigate how my design could respond also to that possibility.

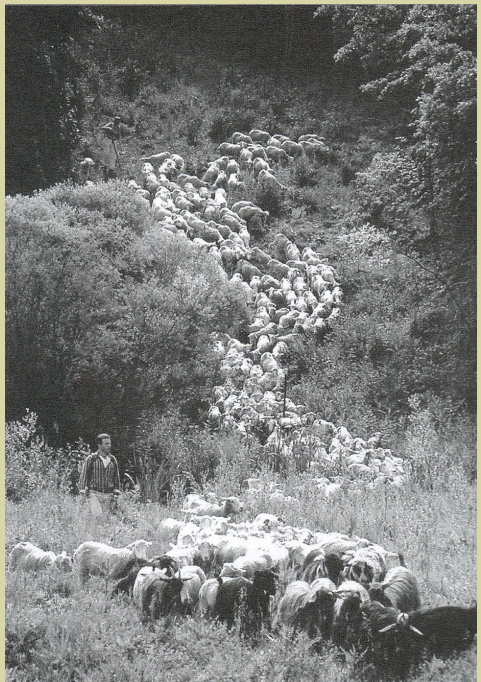
[Fig. 15] At the center, a map of the tratturo magno and in relation with the town. By the author.
[Fig. 16] Above, Pictures of the ruins that were part of the *Tratturo Magno*. Source: Associazione culturale DeSaleo.
[Fig.17] Below, Archival pictures of the *Tratturo Magno*. Source: Associazione culturale DeSaleo.













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