Radicarsi

nella terra

being rooted

in the ground



Research Paper
Adele Maria Saita

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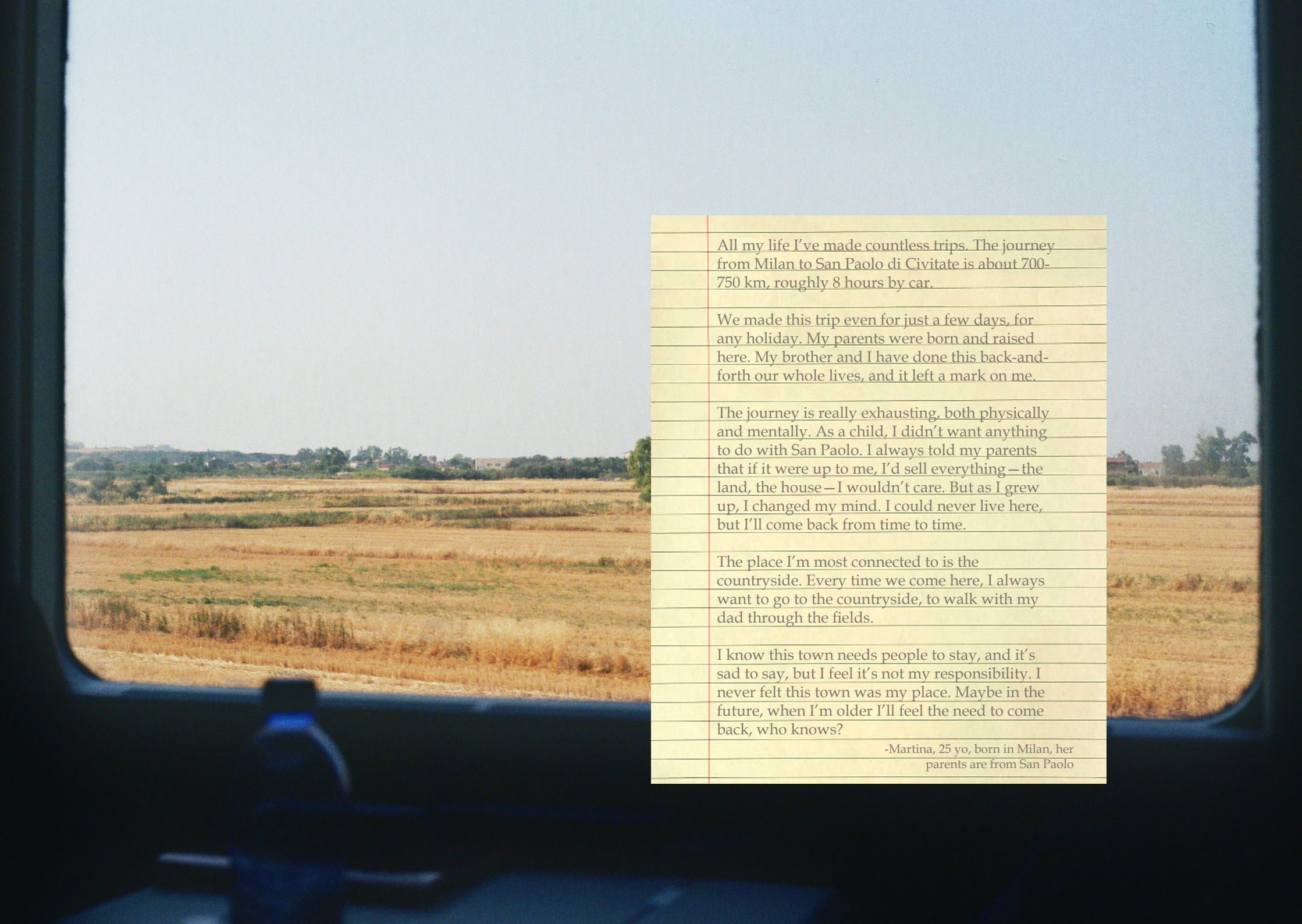
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0. Introduction



All my life I've made countless trips. The journey from Milan to San Paolo di Civitate is about 700-750 km, roughly 8 hours by car.

We made this trip even for just a few days, for any holiday. My parents were born and raised here. My brother and I have done this back-and-forth our whole lives, and it left a mark on me.

The journey is really exhausting, both physically and mentally. As a child, I didn't want anything to do with San Paolo. I always told my parents that if it were up to me, I'd sell everything—the land, the house—I wouldn't care. But as I grew up, I changed my mind. I could never live here, but I'll come back from time to time.

The place I'm most connected to is the countryside. Every time we come here, I always want to go to the countryside, to walk with my dad through the fields.

I know this town needs people to stay, and it's sad to say, but I feel it's not my responsibility. I never felt this town was my place. Maybe in the future, when I'm older I'll feel the need to come back, who knows?

-Martina, 25 yo, born in Milan, her parents are from San Paolo

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.

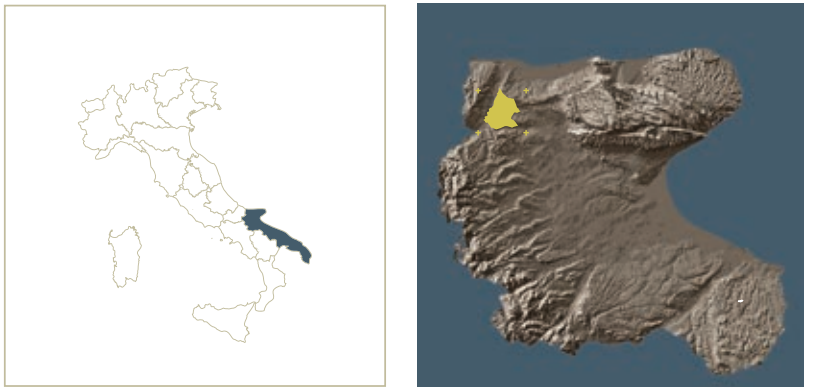
A feeling I can only ever imagine because I am part of that ever-growing group of people who find themselves between cultures, torn between opposite poles of the globe. A generation at times lost, at times freed from the burden and anchor of their roots. Yet whether we deny them or embrace them, our 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. 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 questions

"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?

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 (2023) 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 (UVAL, 2014).

[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)

[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. By the author. Source: ISTAT

1970

6215 6096 6049 5931

5905 5857 5844 5818

5777 5740 5694 5669

2024

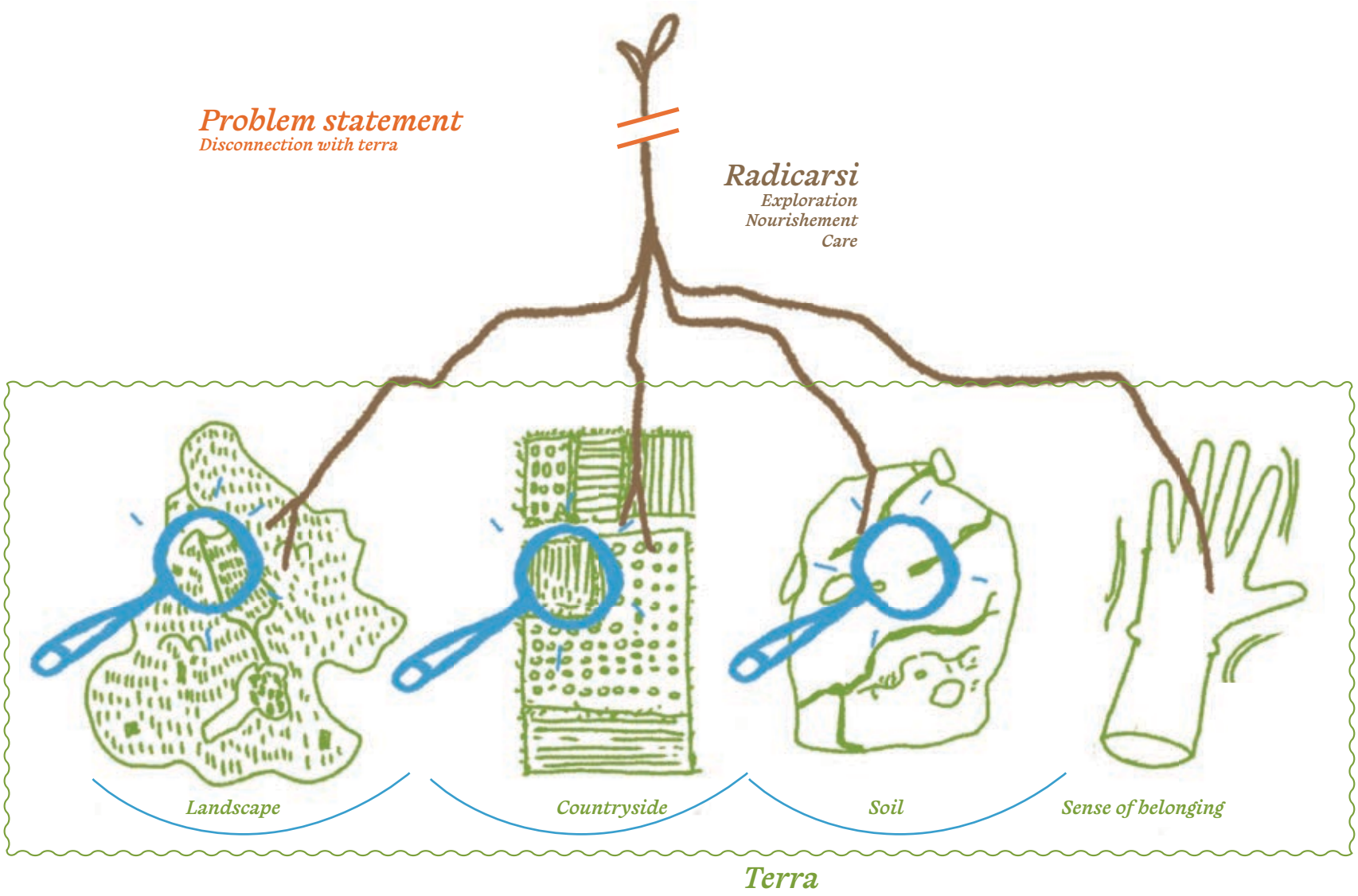
5597 5563 5457 5446

Returning to Serafina's words, San Paolo di Civitate is stuck in a provisional 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 landscape itself. The citizens have lost their physical and intangible connection with their *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 could the countryside find a new role for the people to explore and be actively involved with the *terra*?

2. Methodology



[Fig.5] Research diagram. By the author.

To understand San Paolo di Civitate, I relied primarily on language. This is an approach I developed also by looking at the similar work carried out by the *Società dei Territorialisti/e*, a current of thought that emerged in Italy in the 1980s among intellectuals from various disciplines, which placed the territory at the center of political and academic debate (Società dei territorialisti/e, 2011, p.1). One of its leading exponents, Alberto Magnaghi, compiled a dictionary of "territorialist" terms; he developed it following the advice of the historical geographer Massimo Quaiani, who wrote:

> "I am convinced that the Società dei Territorialisti/e has every reason to propose itself as a leader in the construction of a dictionary that […] does not present itself as the product of a single discipline but rather as the outcome of a transdisciplinary construction of words and categories, concepts and methodological procedures—in a word, of territorial research" [5] (Magnaghi, 2020, p.38).

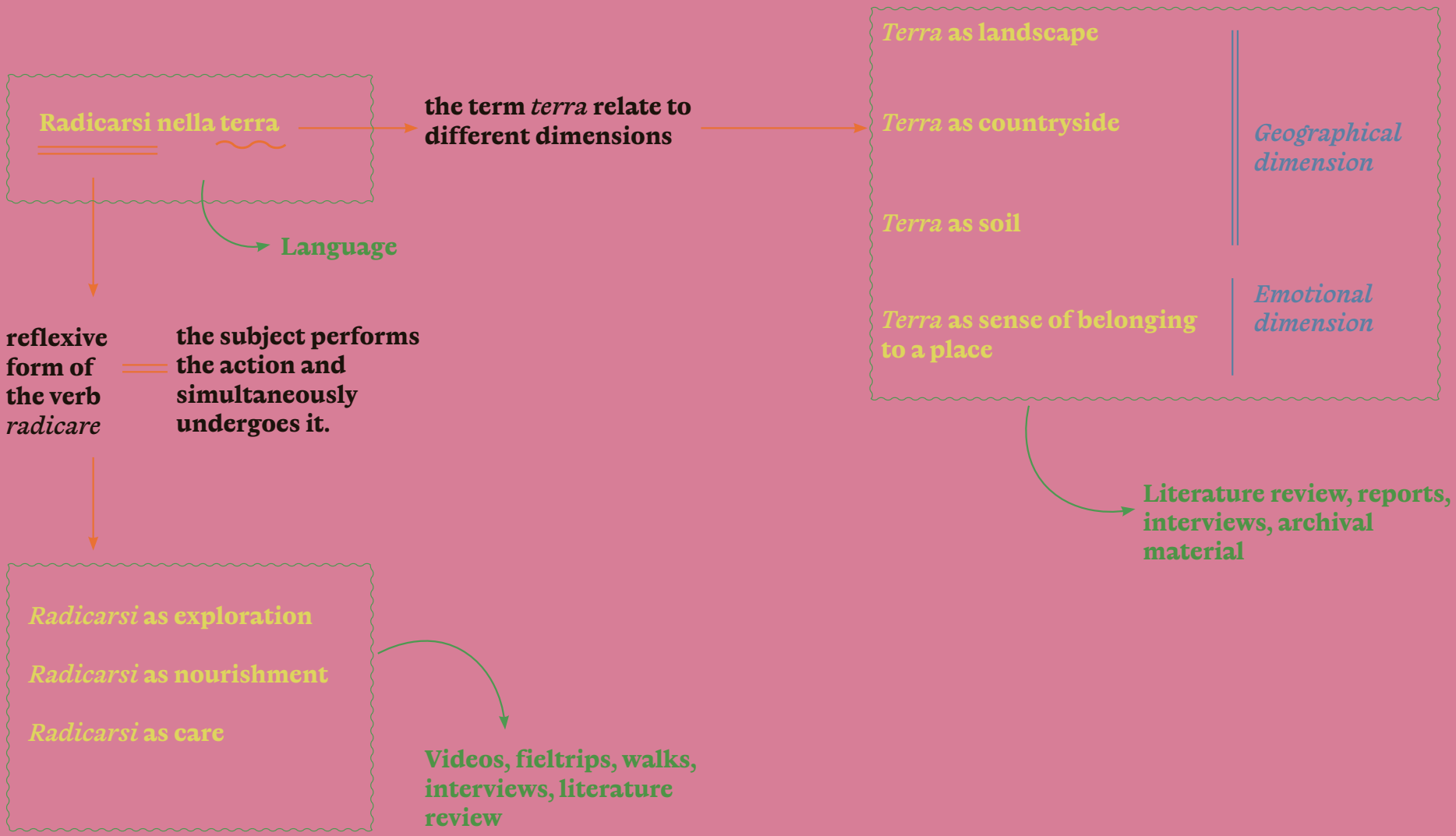
It is precisely this interdisciplinary inquiry, or rather, this desire to investigate a place beyond its materiality and geography, to capture its soul as a living organism, that led me to develop my own personal language aimed at describing San Paolo di Civitate.

The two main concepts on which my research is based are the noun *terra* (landscape, countryside, soil) and the verb *radicarsi* (rootedness). In the following chapters I will delve into the meaning of both, but in summary, I understand *terra* as a tool to situate San Paolo: to outline its history, its most significant transformations, the relevant geographical scales, and the different ways in which inhabitants live and perceive their town. The verb *radicarsi*, instead, is conceived as an active practice of exploration, nourishment, and care for the territory. Decoding San Paolo through the word *terra* offers a comprehensive vision of the place across three geographical scales and one emotional scale, while *radicarsi* represents the possible strategies for intervention. [Fig.5]

Although language became my primary research method, I also consulted books, reports, and several archives to build my understanding of the village. Moreover, the stories of the inhabitants were the thread that guided my exploration of the possibilities of the design project. I conducted several interviews, which are included throughout these pages, each corresponding to its respective chapter.

Finally, what helped me connect most personally with the place were the long walks, both alone and in company, throughout the territory. Without these, I could not have felt with my heart and skin the soul of San Paolo di Civitate.

[5] **Sono convinto che la Società dei Territorialisti/e abbia tutti i titoli per proporsi come capofila per la costruzione di un dizionario che […] non si ponga come prodotto di una disciplina principale ma come prodotto di una transdisciplinarità in costruzione delle parole e delle categorie, dei concetti e delle procedure metodologiche, in una parola della ricerca del territorio (Original version, translated by the author)**



[Fig.6] Methodology diagram. By the author.

3. Terra



At least once a day I need to touch the soil to feel good. I don't know why but touching it give a sense of peace.

- Serafina, 72 yo, born and raised in San Paolo, moved to Milan for 20 years, came back to San paolo at 55 yo

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*.[6] It is a word I have frequently heard used in all possible meanings in the stories of *san paolesi* [7] , so much so that it led me to ask:

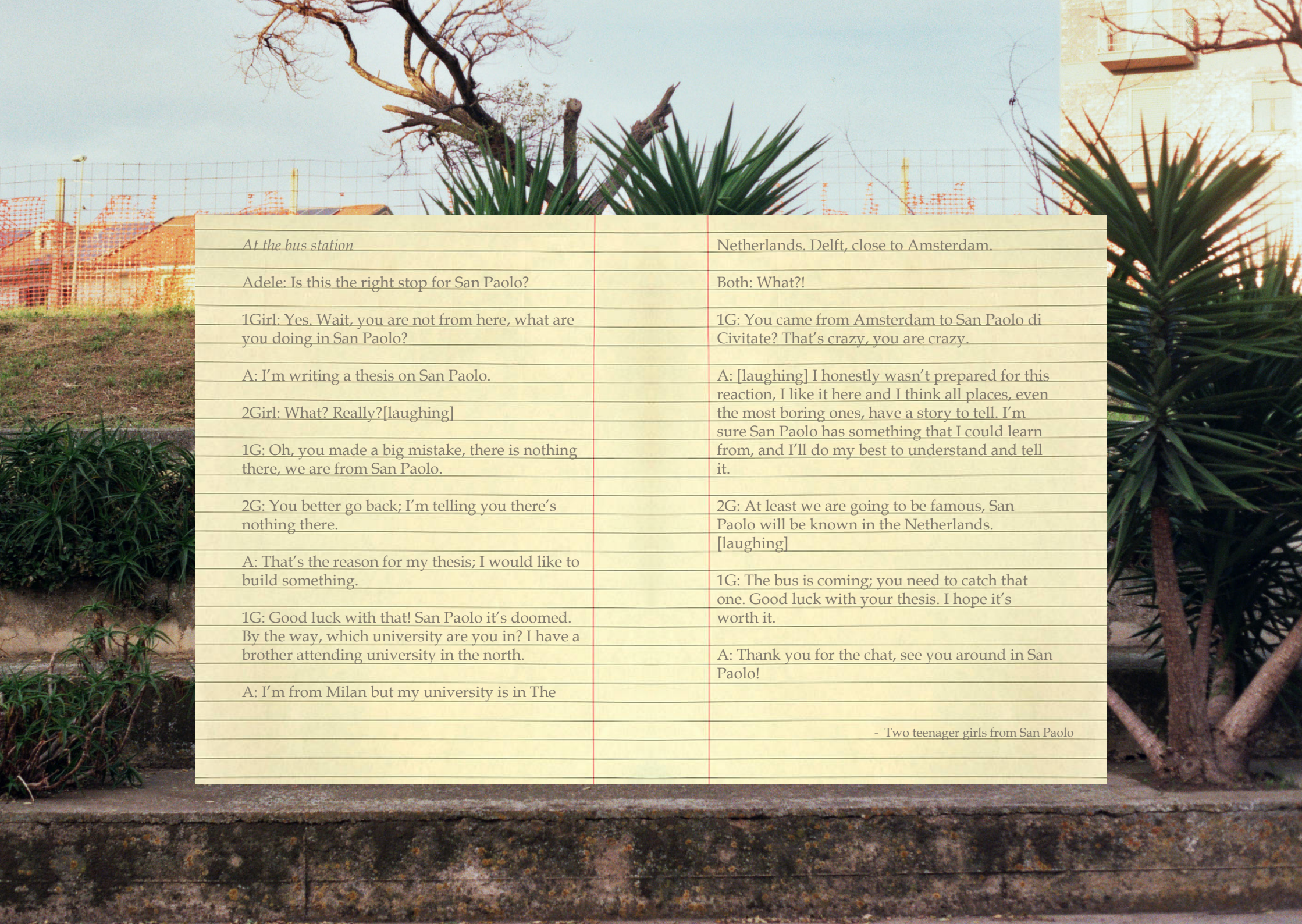
"What do they mean? Are they talking about the soil? The countryside? The town?".

It is clear, therefore, that the word *terra* relates to different scale (Pavia, 2020, p.5). In the case of San Paolo di Civitate, I identified three geographical dimensions and one emotional dimension. For the first category from the largest to the smallest: *terra* as landscape, *terra* as countryside, and *terra* as soil. Identifying and reflecting on these three dimensions allowed me to think of my project in dialogue with the entire territory. It is precisely this dialogue, the lack of connection between the inhabitants and their land, that is the issue I most wish to explore.

Encoding these three dimensions through the word *terra* allowed me to find a *fil rouge* linking the disconnected parts, moreover, enabled me to understand the emotional bond the inhabitants have with their territory: the place that cradles their roots and holds their sense of belonging. Because to understand a landscape, it is necessary to pass through that ungraspable, complex, nuanced feeling that connects the inhabitants to their place. (*terra* as sense of belonging).

It is therefore through this geographic and emotional decoding that I have portrayed the *terra* of San Paolo di Civitate.

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



At the bus station

Adele: Is this the right stop for San Paolo?

1Girl: Yes. Wait, you are not from here, what are you doing in San Paolo?

A: I'm writing a thesis on San Paolo.

2Girl: What? Really?[laughing]

1G: Oh, you made a big mistake, there is nothing there, we are from San Paolo.

2G: You better go back; I'm telling you there's nothing there.

A: That's the reason for my thesis; I would like to build something.

1G: Good luck with that! San Paolo it's doomed. By the way, which university are you in? I have a brother attending university in the north.

A: I'm from Milan but my university is in The Netherlands. Delft, close to Amsterdam.

Both: What?!

1G: You came from Amsterdam to San Paolo di Civitate? That's crazy, you are crazy.

A: [laughing] I honestly wasn't prepared for this reaction, I like it here and I think all places, even the most boring ones, have a story to tell. I'm sure San Paolo has something that I could learn from, and I'll do my best to understand and tell it.

2G: At least we are going to be famous, San Paolo will be known in the Netherlands. [laughing]

1G: The bus is coming; you need to catch that one. Good luck with your thesis. I hope it's worth it.

A: Thank you for the chat, see you around in San Paolo!

- Two teenager girls from San Paolo

Terra as Landscape

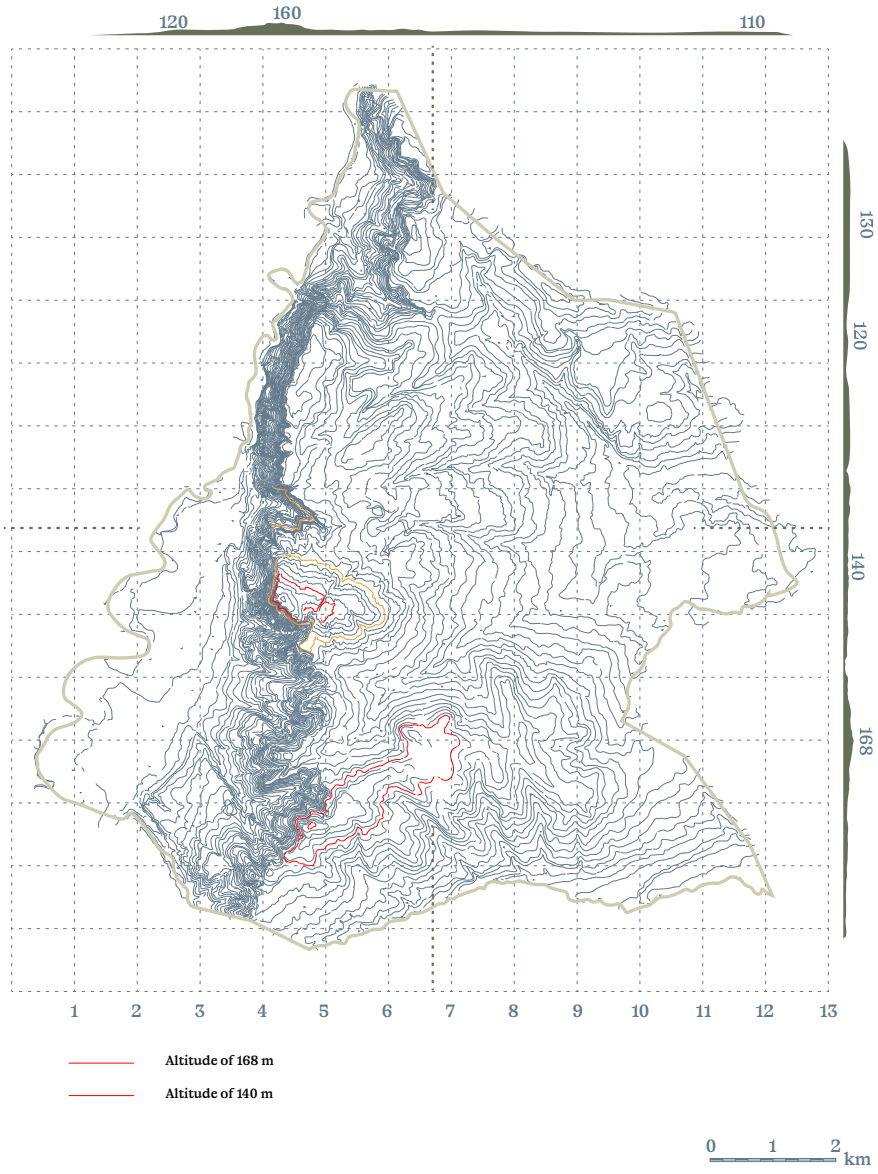
To speak of *terra* as landscape means to consider it not as a static backdrop, but as a palimpsest of layers, transformations, and histories. The landscape at once material and symbolic: a living organism in perpetual mutation, shaped by geological forces, ecological dynamics, and cultural practices. Magnaghi describes the landscape as:

"[…] The landscape does not merely concern but rather constitutes above all a foundational component of the identity of places across the entire territory of a region, as perceived and practiced by its inhabitants."[8] (Magnaghi, 2020, p.62)

Beginning from this dimension is crucial. It allows us to situate San Paolo di Civitate within the span of its history and transformations before narrowing the lens: first into the countryside and then further still into the soil. In this way, the landscape becomes not only the setting in which human activities unfold, but also the medium through which identities, memories, and collective imaginaries are inscribed.

The name of the town, San Paolo di Civitate, reflects its dual heritage: San Paolo, the modern settlement, and Civitate (known in Roman times as *Teatum Apulum* or earlier as *Tiati*), the ancient settlement. The old settlement was strategically located near the Fortore River, providing both proximity to key trade routes and a vantage point over the valley while the modern settlement extends across a hilly area overlooking the Tavoliere delle Puglie plain. [Fig.6]

[8] […] Il paesaggio non riguarda ma costituisce soprattutto una componente fondativa dell'identità dei luoghi dell'intero territorio di una regione, così come percepita e praticata dai suoi abitanti. (Original version, translated by the author)



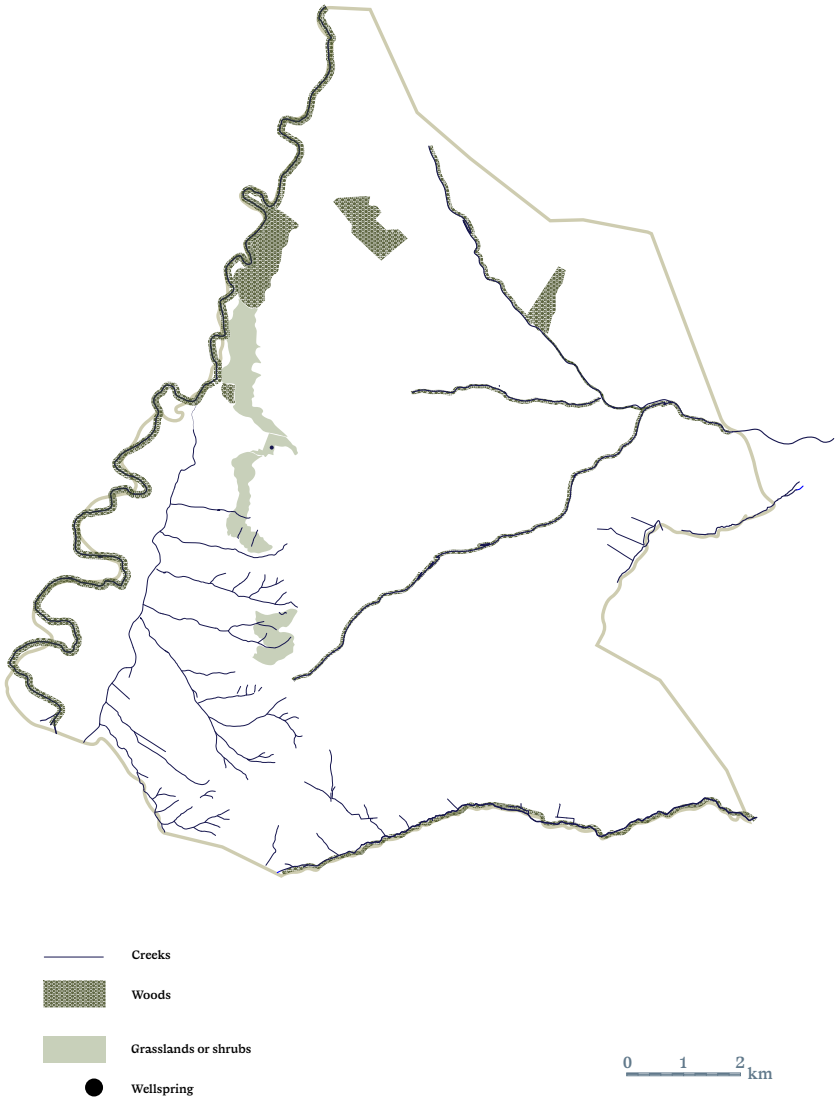
[Fig.6] Above, a map of the height of San Paolo di Civitate. By the author.

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.

Today, woodlands and meadows account for just 4% of the landscape, with forests covering a mere 0.4% (Regione Puglia, 2015, p.50), while the rest consinsts by agricultural fields, mostly vineyards and olive trees; a topic I will elaborate on further in the next chapter.

Within the municipality, two wooded areas remain: Bosco della Copparella della Scrofa and Bosco di Madonna del Ponte, both located north of the village. [Fig.7]

Beyond these, the remaining vegetation follows the natural course of the creeks. The most common trees are the white willow (*Salix alba*), red willow (*Salix purpurea*), elm (*Ulmus campestris*), and white poplar (*Populus alba*) (Regione Puglia, 2015, p.50). The fauna consists of only a few resident species and is primarily comprised of migratory ones. Due to the fragmentation and scarcity of vegetation, migratory species are present only briefly and for short periods (Comune di San Severo, 2023, p.6). However, the Fortore River area, where the two forests are located, was once an important ecological corridor. Although it has been impoverished by human activity, it still serves as a route for some migratory

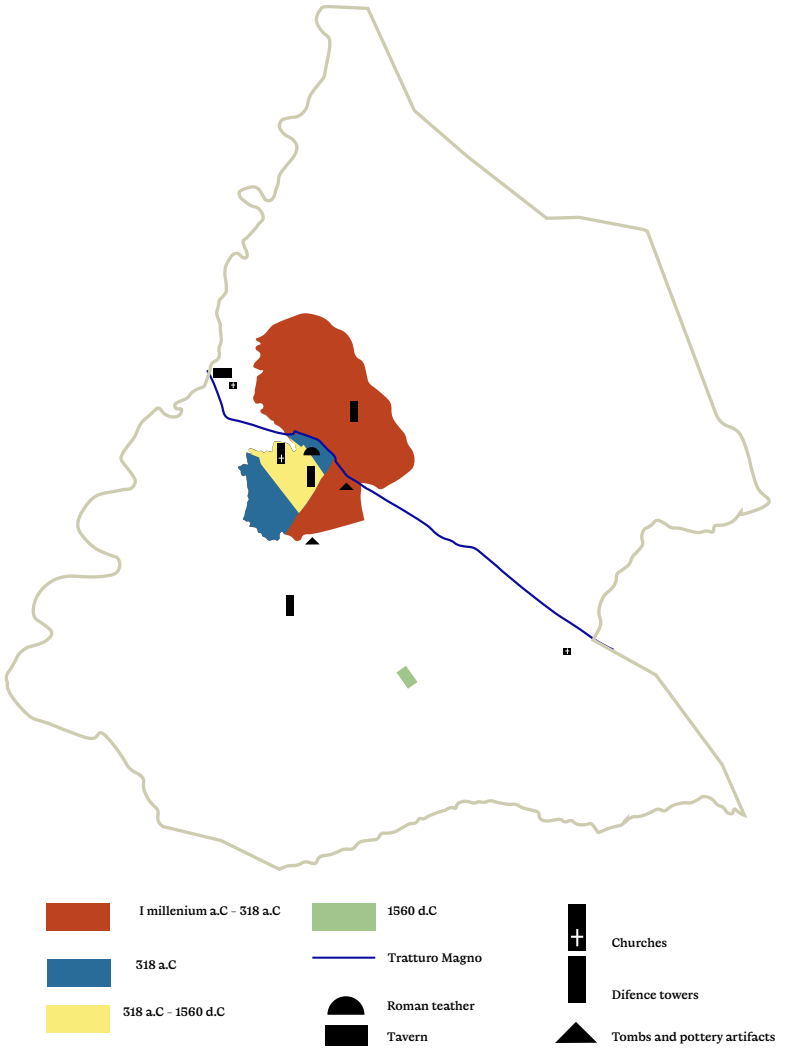


[Fig.7] Above, a map of the rivers and vegetation. By the author.

birds (Regione Puglia, 2023, p.8). Furthermore, the area is home to rodents, lizards, hedgehogs, hares, foxes, wild boars, and bats. (Comune di San Severo, 2023, p. 9-12).
One of the most significant pathways was the *Tratturo Magno*, an ancient route used by shepherds for the seasonal migration of sheep from the mountains of Abruzzo to the plains of Apulia. This pathway functioned not only as an ecological corridor but also as a bearer of historical and cultural significance. [Fig.8]

Over the centuries, the role of San Paolo as a place of passage did not disappear but rather transformed. Once a crossroads for shepherds, the town later became, in 1976, an important stopping point for travelers moving along the Adriatica, only high-speed road at the time linking northern and southern Italy. In this sense, San Paolo has consistently been embedded in a broader geography of movement of paths, migrations, and transitions. Today, however, many of these routes have either vanished or been reduced to repetitive, localized circuits, such as the ritual of *fare le vasche* (literally "to swim the pools"), the slow, habitual walking up and down the village's main street: from the central square to the fenced park called "La Villa".

Yet, even as many of these pathways have faded, the traces of earlier passages remain embedded in the territory itself. The history of the old settlement is still visible through the archaeological artifacts and ruins unearthed over the



[Fig.8] Above, a map of the various settlements and ruins of San Paolo di Civitate. By the author.

years. Excavations have revealed a significant number of clay vases, amphorae, plates, and other utensils. It was discovered that the trade of these objects was so prosperous that it extended beyond the regional borders, as similar artifacts have been found in areas near Naples (Museo Archeologico di San Paolo, 2023, p.43). Other recovered structures include a watchtower, a theater, various tombs, and a kiln, each constructed with locally available materials such as river stones and clay. Despite the historical importance of these discoveries, the excavation sites have not received sufficient funding for a proper restoration. While the archeological area is known and proudly visited by locals and school groups, it lacks the necessary infrastructure for full public enjoyment and accessibility.

In this interweaving of places, paths, people, and stories, the *terra* of San Paolo di Civitate is not merely a collection of natural elements or human-made artifacts, but an inextricable network of relationships, practices, and memories. To understand the landscape is to recognize it as a living organism, in continuous evolution, shaped as much by geological and ecological forces as by the activities and rituals of those who inhabit it. As Magnaghi emphasizes, the return to the territory and the valorization of its components form the basis for new forms of local development. (Magnaghi, 2020, p.29). The *terra*, therefore, is not a simple backdrop: it is the medium through which identities, collective memories, and future potential intertwine, inviting us to care for it and to understand it.



[Fig. 9] Embrodery map of the San Paolo's municipality. By the author.



[Fig.10] Landscape of San Paolo di Civitate, connection from the town to the old settlement and the countryside in between. By the author.

Terra as Countryside

The word *terra* is used to refer to the surface that can be plowed, hoed, and cultivated. And this type of *terra*, which constitutes the countryside, is perhaps the key element in understanding the town's identity. This connection was expressed by Michele, a 62-year-old architect from San Paolo, who recalled an old saying among farmers:

"Those who plant an olive tree do so not for their children but for their grandchildren, as the tree only begins to produce mature fruit when it is 40 to 50 years old."[9]

This intergenerational perspective underlines how agriculture, even something as simple as an olive tree, is tied to intimate and familiar bonds. Planting marks only the beginning of this rooted connection; it is in the product of the countryside, therefore in cooking and sharing food that affection finds its voice.

During one of my visits, while dining with the extended family of a friend, I was told a recurring sentence used to be said to foreigners:

"We don't care who you are; we care about how much you can eat."[10]

Therefore, the act of cooking becomes a means of communication, hospitality, and almost familiar bonding. It is expressed not only in the domestic setting, when on Sundays the entire family gathers for lunch by joining together tables and chairs from every room of the house; the products of the countryside are also an expression of the town's identity, with proud claims to its typical products.

[9] 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)



[Fig.11] Above, a map of the countryside of San Paolo di Civitate. By the author.

However, agricultural life is no longer an integral part of daily existence for all residents. Only those actively working as farmers continue to follow the rhythms of the countryside, while most inhabitants of San Paolo, even if they still own small plots of land, face limited options: using it for personal purposes, delegating its upkeep to others, or selling it. As a result, the countryside has become increasingly privatized, creating both physical and symbolic barriers that hinder exploration and re-engagement with the land (Volpe, 2022, p.141).

To remain relevant in community life, agricultural spaces must adapt to an "ever-evolving social demand"[11] (Belligiano, 2010, p.69). I believe this transformation can be achieved by reimagining the countryside as a collective space for social and cultural interaction. On this note, I had the privilege of discovering a remarkable example: Masseria Faugno farm. The farm had an important relevance in the path of the Tratturo Magno, it gave shelter to the shepherds and sheep that were traveling along the way. Now, the farm is owned by Michele and Paolo Niro, who are proud of the history of their farm but focused on the future. Therefore, they focused on innovative and more sustainable practices to cultivate their products. Beyond agriculture, they have also opened their farm to the local community, transforming it into a cultural hub. During the summer, they host cultural dinners, inviting local historians, actors, and poets to share their knowledge while partnering with local producers for the food served.

The countryside already has the potential to be used as a public space. Much of the archaeological heritage is found there, as well as the beauty and very essence of the town. Moreover, the countryside still speaks an architectural language dotted with micro-architectures such as wells, small storage huts, silos, entrance portals, and retaining walls, all constructions built with bricks or stones. [Fig.12-13] Small elements, often abandoned, closed, or illegally occupied by people, vegetation, or animals, which bear witness to an important past that is now being reinterpreted.



[10] Non ci importa chi sei, ma quanto puoi manguare (Original version, translated by the author)
[11] Una domanda sociale in continua evoluzione." (Original version, translated by the author)

[Fig.12] Above, drawings of the brick structures in the countryside. By the author.













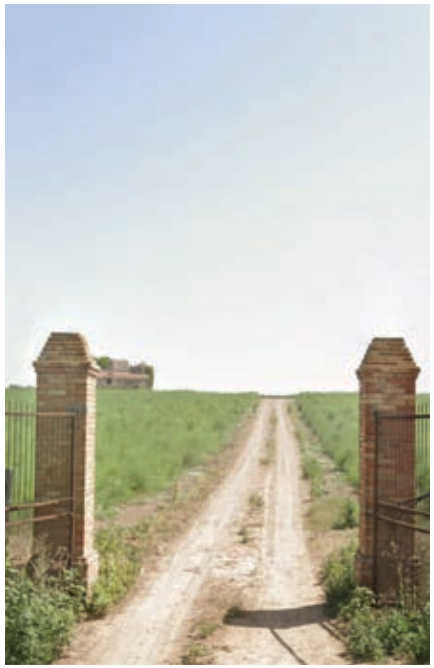
[Fig.13] Pictures of abandoned structures in the countryside. By the author.











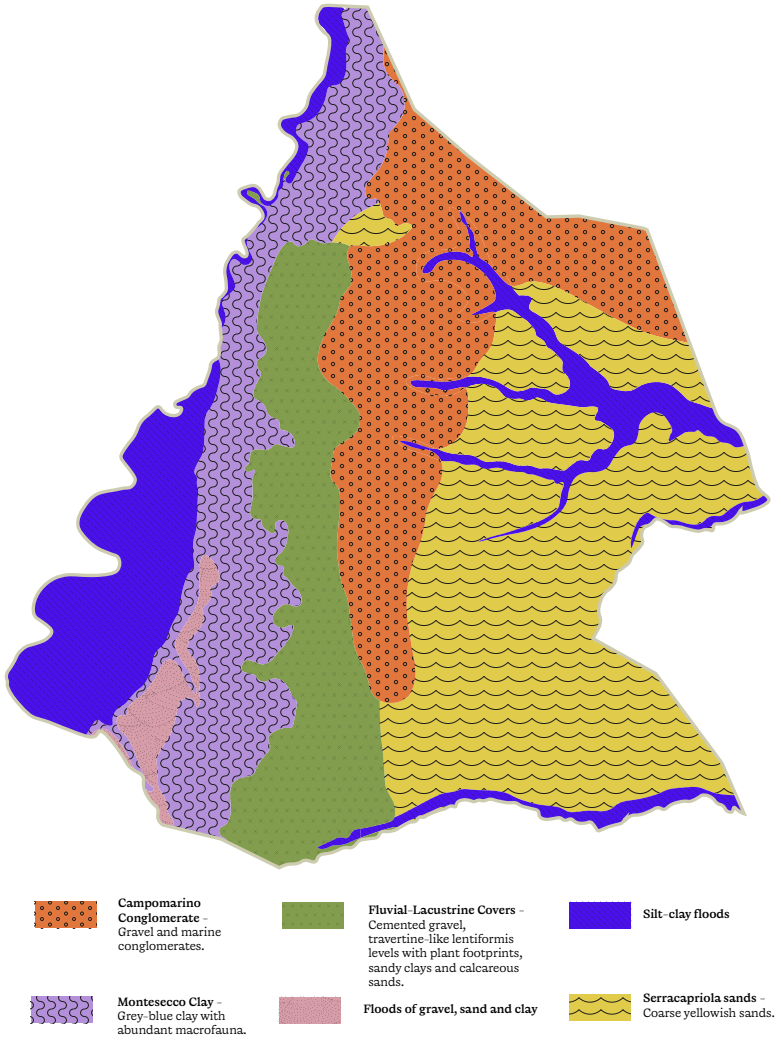


[Fig.13] Pictures of abandoned structures in the countryside. Source: Google Maps.

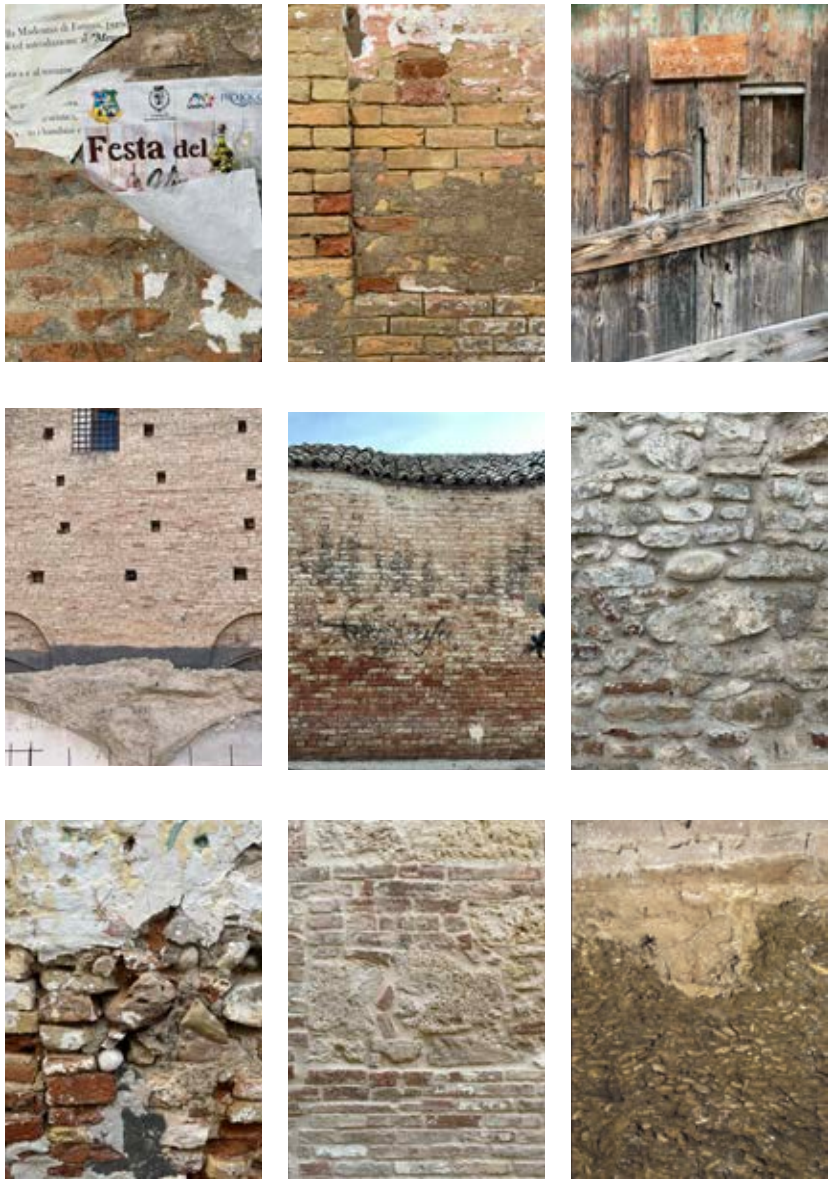
Terra as Soil

The etymological definition of *terra* refers to the "solid part of the globe" (Dizionario etimologico, Unknown). Beyond this essential meaning, soil is matter, origin, and foundation: it determines the form of settlements and sustains their architecture. As Pavia notes, "to bear witness to the close relationship between place, soil, and urban form, we must look at smaller settlements, where the porous boundary between city and countryside remains perceptible. Here one can still read the intimate relation between soil, subsoil, and the built fabric, which adapts to the morphology of the site by using its stones and construction materials" (Pavia, 2019, p.11). In this sense, soil acts as an environmental infrastructure, silently shaping both the material and cultural life of a place. Geologically, the soil of San Paolo is composed of coarse gravel and clay conglomerates (Valente, 1984, p. 11) [Fig.14], making it compact, impermeable, and therefore vulnerable to erosion. These conditions have long influenced construction practices. The earliest buildings relied on locally available materials such as handcrafted bricks, river stones, and rocks. [Fig.15] The connection between ground and architecture was thus immediate and visible: walls, streets, and houses were built out of the matter beneath one's feet.

The subsoil, too, played a crucial role. In the past, it was customary for every house to have a cellar, used especially for wine-making. [Fig.17]



[Fig. 14] Above, a map of the soil of San Paolo di Civitate. By the author.



[Fig. 15] Above, pictures of the materials used in the town's old buildings. By the author.

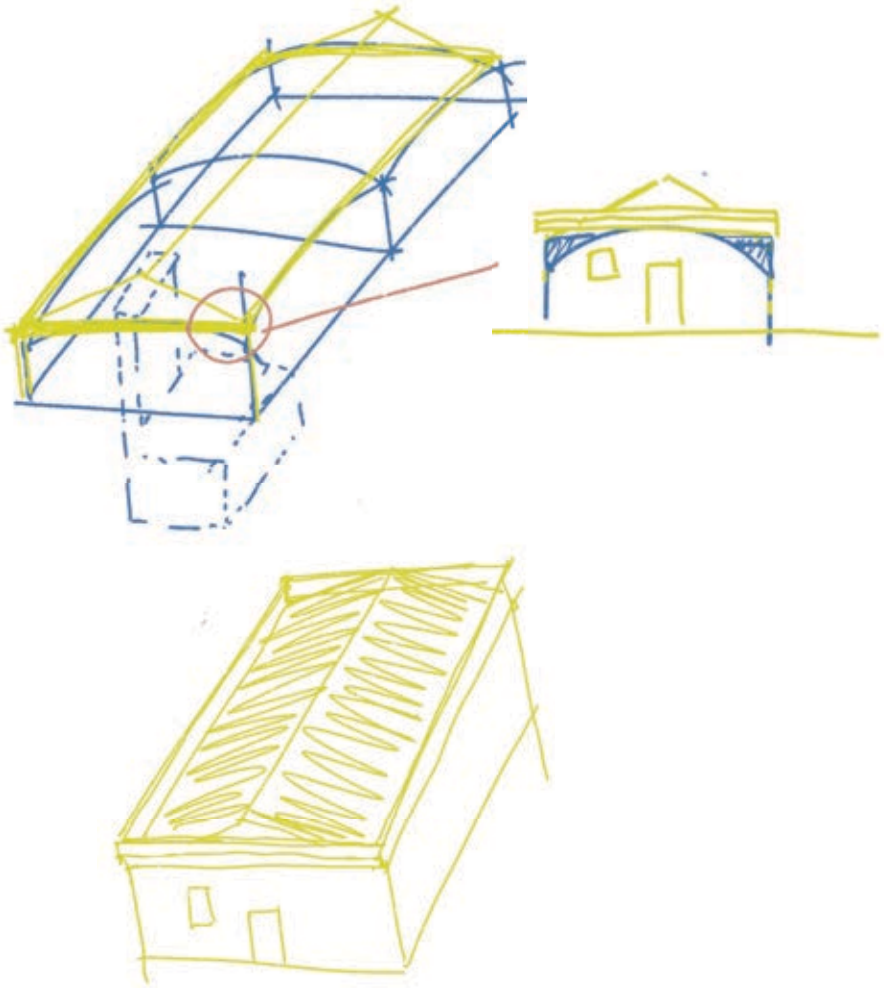
On Sundays, when families prepared wine, the town would fill with the scent of fermenting must as cellars opened onto the street through small apertures. In one cellar I visited, I observed the use of river stones in wall construction, further evidence of the intimate dialogue between soil and architecture. [Fig.16] The subsoil also hosted public infrastructures: in the main square, *fosse granarie* underground grain pits were dug to store and protect harvests. [Fig.18]

The material presence of soil is equally perceptible in the thresholds of the settlement. Streets within the urban core gradually lose their paved surfaces and blend into unpaved rural tracks, marking a transition between built form and countryside. The main square and central streets are paved with *basolato*: in some stretches recently restored, in others preserved in their original state, using stone from the nearby town of Apricena.

These material languages of paving, of walls, of cellars once articulated a coherent system in which the soil was simultaneously above and below ground, reappearing in different forms throughout the village . Therefore, to regain that closeness to the soil, it is important to take these architectural traditions as an example of how a design should consider its materiality and its spatial organization.



[Fig. 16] Above, drawing of a wall made by river stones. By the author.



[Fig.17] Drawings of an old farmer's house. On the drawing it can be seen the underground cellar and, in between the roof and the slab, a small storage space where usually grain was stored. By the author.



[Fig. 18] Drawings of a grain store pit, one of the eight located in the central square of the village. The drawings, from up left to right, show: the opening of the pit made by stones, the section and a detail of the interior wall. By the author draw on the pictures made by Giuseppe Candela.



I've spent more years away than here in my homeland. However, the years I lived here shaped me. I'm still deeply connected to my land, to these places, and every time I can I come back; **my mind is always here**.
My idea is to build something for our future, for my children's future, but also for my own future. I would like to come back here as soon as both of my children are settled, with my wife.
My regret is that many things will be lost along with us. My hope is in the young people; I hope there will be a return to the countryside. San Paolo has always lived and has always been connected to the countryside. Many of my friends stayed here and became farmers.
In hindsight, if I could go back, I wouldn't become an architect but I would have been a farmer.

- Michele, 63 yo, born and raised in San Paolo, he left the village in his 20s to study architecture in Milan

Terra as Sense of belonging

A chi appartèn? [12]

This is a question I was asked the very first time I went to San Paolo di Civitate. In the Sanpaolese dialect, it literally translates to: "To whom do you belong?" and it can be understood as: "Who are your parents, which family do you come from?" It is the way one is still identified in small towns where the sense of community remains strong.

Yet, it is different when we speak of belonging to a place. The portrait I have composed so far of San Paolo di Civitate suggests that many, particularly adolescents, would rather not belong to this place. It was said to me between the lines by the girls I spoke with at the bus stop; it was said to me by Martina; and it was also said by a man I met in the countryside during one of my walks:

"I left when I was twenty, and if you ask me why I did it, I'll answer you with a question: at your age, would you like to live here?"[13]

My answer was: "Not forever."

There is another generation, those who left at precisely my age and built their lives and families in the big cities of northern Italy.

"I tried living abroad for a few years. I worked as a laborer in Germany, I wanted a different experience, but then I came back. I came back to my land,"

Giuseppe tells me.

"And when I go to visit my relatives in Turin, or in any other city in the north, I feel suffocated. I miss the countryside, I miss taking walks,"[14] he concludes.

In light of this opposite division between those who wish not to belong and those who belong with conviction, I asked myself: does the terra of San Paolo di Civitate belong only to those who are born here? Can we imagine other users of this land? Someone like me, who might not want to stay forever, but perhaps only for a few months or weeks. Someone who would need to pause just for a moment and observe the silence of the countryside, to be enveloped by its touches and its scents. To decide whether to remain or to leave, but not before allowing themselves to be invaded by the feeling of belonging to the *terra*, and of feeling the *terra* belong to them.

[12] San Paolo's dialet for: Who do you belong to?

[13] Io me ne sono andato che avevo vent'anni e se mi chiedi il perché l'ho fatto io ti rispondo con una domanda: a te, a quest'età, piacerebbe vivere qui? (Original version, translated by the author)

[14] Io ho provato a vivere fuori per qualche anno. Facevo l'operaio in Germania, volevo farmi un'esperienza diversa ma poi sono tornato qua. Sono tornato nella mia terra. E quando vado a trovare i miei parenti a Torino, o in qualsiasi altra città del nord mi sento soffocare. Mi manca la campagna, mi manca passeggiare. (Original version, translated by the author)

4. Radicarsi



As soon as I retired I start walking. I was never aware of how much I didn't know about my own home. When I didn't renew my driver's license, it was because I didn't need it anymore.

I'm glad you decided to come with us. Now you really know San Paolo's territory, because you chose to walk and to explore. You might even understand this place better than some locals who never do that.

- Peppino, 71 yo, born and raised in San Paolo

Radicarsi

Radicarsi means to root in.

"Growing roots" is an expression used to indicate the desire to form a permanent bond with a place. It is an expression tied to fixity: trees cannot move, they are bound to the ground. Yet what fascinates me about roots is their paradoxical nature: they cling to a given location, but at the same time they are not immobile; they explore and traverse all layers of the soil, horizontally and vertically. This is what I wanted from my project: a strong connection to the place, a bond that does not close in on itself, but remains open: a wandering connection.

Moreover, I chose to conjugate the verb in Italian *radicarsi* using the reflexive form, the verb form that indicates the action performed by the subject falls back upon the subject itself. In other words, the subject performs the action and simultaneously experiences it. This is the intention I imagined the inhabitants of San Paolo could draw from my project: to rediscover their territory and, at the same time, participate in it, as if discovery were both an act they perform and an experience that happens to them.

Roots draw nourishment from the soil, but in return, they are part of an ecosystem that protects it, that cares for it. From this idea, I identified three ways to intervene on the *terra* of San Paolo: exploration, nourishment, and care.

Finally, to root oneself in a place is to create new roots, new nodes, new connections. It is to understand, case by case, the unique history and geography of a place, and to design responses that belong projects that grow from within rather than being imposed from above.



Inside the grass threads
Between the cracks of the asphalt
In the empty space
Between each tiny pebble
I thought I saw too
Something that is not there.
Hidden in plain sight.

Hidden in plain sight – I Cani

Radicarsi as Exploration

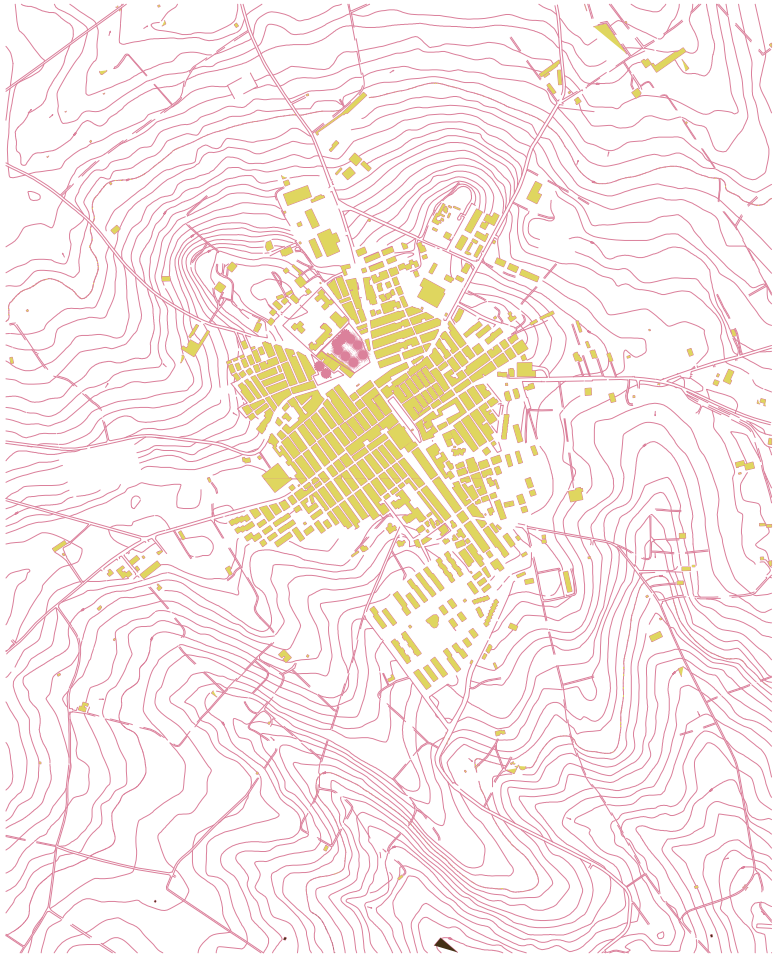
Nascosta in piena vista [14]

is the title of a famous Italian indie song. A contradictory title, yet so special that it has settled in the bed of my memory. How can something hide in plain sight? I have always wondered. Perhaps it becomes so obvious that it loses its dimension in space, so obvious that it shrinks until it becomes invisible, even while remaining there, lying unnoticed.

Hidden in plain sight is that something that exists but remains, precisely as such, unnoticed; and I would like to start from this idea. To talk about how to intervene in this territory, it is important to begin with the concept of observing, of seeing, of laying one's eyes on something—not as a mere superficial act, but as an initial ritual of physical and sensory connection; the beginning of a long conversation with what escapes us.

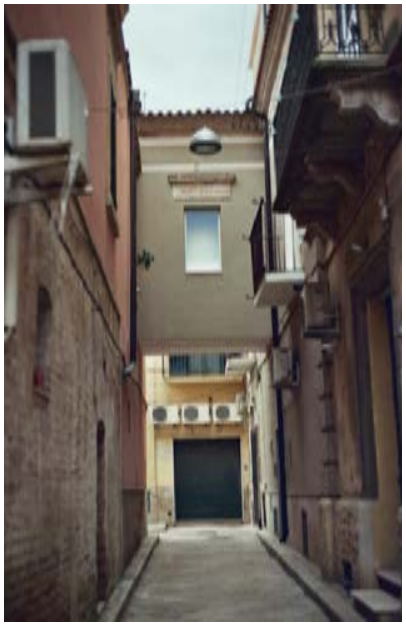
San Paolo is no stranger to going unnoticed. The village has lost the historical and cultural relevance it once held in different periods, and this has led to a growing indifference toward a place everyone says should be left as soon as possible. And so people stopped observing, just as they stopped thinking they were worth someone else's gaze. Having spent years in the city, I would argue that part of the problem lies in the urban layout. The streets of San Paolo are narrow and perpendicular. The town's urban typology—regular, rational, and dense with buildings—does not allow even a glimpse of the countryside. [Fig.19]

[14] Italian for Hidden in plain sight.



[Fig.19] Map of the San Paolo. By the author.





[Fig.20] Pictures of the village alleys. By the author.

The windows of the houses are small, not meant to let in that summer sun capable of scorching. Walking through the streets, one barely notices that the village is surrounded by the countryside. There is an inside, the village, and an outside, the countryside. Inside and outside: the beginning of a disconnection that is first visual but spreads and penetrates more deeply.

The main gathering places are the park of the Villa, the main square, the pub, and a few bars that open only in summer. Events are organized at some farmhouses in the countryside, as well as walks to discover ruins.

Giuseppe Pennacchia, 71 years old, born and raised in San Paolo di Civitate, tells me he was one of the first to start countryside excursions. Since retiring, he has devoted himself to long, meandering walks, from the village to the Liburi mountains, passing the Civitate spring and the Fortore river. Along the way, he's built a rich archive of photographs and videos: wildflowers, plants, and fruits, some of which find their way into the dishes he prepares. He calls himself a *terrazzano*, an old word for a gatherer of wild herbs and fruits, though for most of his life he ran a construction company. When we speak for the first time over the phone, he is, as always, out walking. The view, he tells me, is breathtaking; then he begins to talk about his life:

"At school, they taught us to turn our backs on our land. They told us to become mechanics, builders, accountants, go north, work in factories and offices. It was and it is so harmful. There's so much beauty, so

[15] A scuola ci hanno insegnato a voltare le spalle alla terra. Ci hanno detto di diventare meccanici, costruttori, contabili, andare a nord, lavorare in fabbriche e uffici. È stato ed è così dannoso. Qui c'è tanta bellezza, tanta biodiversità che merita di essere protetta.(Original version, translated by the author.)

much biodiversity here that deserves to be protected."[15]

He continues, telling me about *lampascioni*, Sinapis arvensis, viper's bugloss, *borragine*, and thistle. He speaks of these herbs and of how his wife, daughter of a true *terrazzano*, taught him how to recognize them. In that memory, there's a deeper thread: a transmission of ancient knowledge, a quiet, enduring connection to the land. It speaks of a love, a mutual care between human and nature that feels, in his words, not only possible but necessary.

Giuseppe and stayed in touch, and during my visit in May, I ask him if I can join his walks. [Fig.21] His wife Anna also joins, and the three of us set off at 6 a.m. At that hour, the sun is still shy, so we can walk without fear. The countryside is quiet; only the occasional tractor passes. Giuseppe takes me to see the Torrione, an ancient watchtower, and I discover how along the path, the ruin plays hide-and-seek: hiding behind cypresses or framed by them. We pass the camel hills, two hills that resemble a camel's humps. He tells me about the "missing valleys", those points where a flat area is interrupted by the rising topography of the land:

"It's a valley that didn't manage to become one."

We follow dirt roads, make our way through tall grass that brushes and pricks us, and catch bursts of fragrance from the flowers around us. Beneath my feet, I feel the earth, soft and rich in clay in some places, friable with stones and sand in others.

And there, in the midst of the land, with my arms, my hands, my breath rooted in that earth, I realize how much here **there's something.**





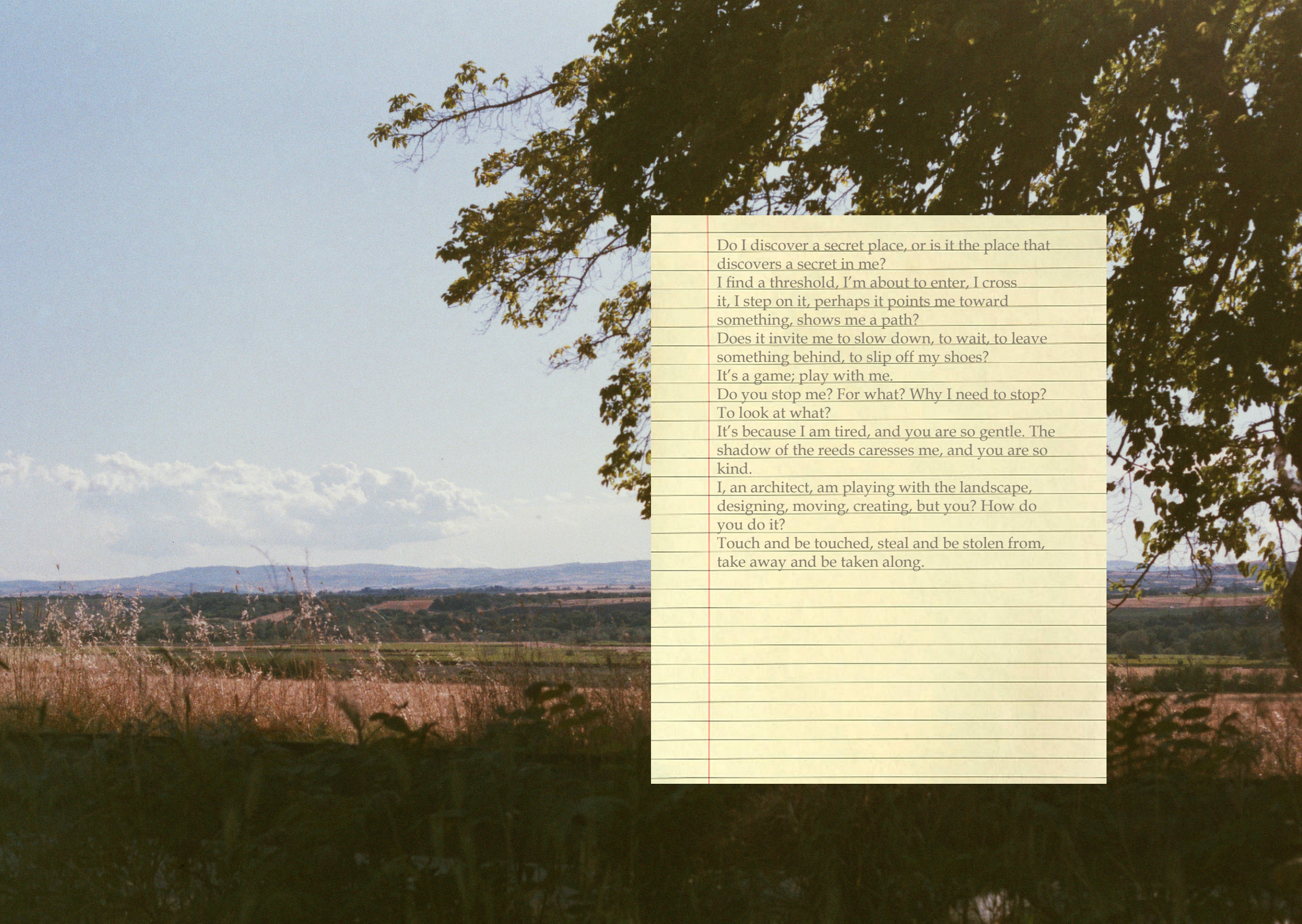








[Fig.21] Pictures of the countryside. By the author.



Do I discover a secret place, or is it the place that discovers a secret in me?
I find a threshold, I'm about to enter, I cross it, I step on it, perhaps it points me toward something, shows me a path?
Does it invite me to slow down, to wait, to leave something behind, to slip off my shoes?
It's a game; play with me.
Do you stop me? For what? Why I need to stop? To look at what?
It's because I am tired, and you are so gentle. The shadow of the reeds caresses me, and you are so kind.
I, an architect, am playing with the landscape, designing, moving, creating, but you? How do you do it?
Touch and be touched, steal and be stolen from, take away and be taken along.

Radicarsi as Nourishment

The etymology of the word terra comes from the root tars, meaning "to be dry, to dry out." The earth is the dry thing, in contrast with the wet thing, the sea (Dizionario Etimologico Online, Unknow).

In the chapter about the problem statement, I concluded with a sentence: the terra of San Paolo is alive. Yet I realize this statement is only partially accurate. Its unexpressed possibilities allow me to say it is a terra alive, but at the same time, because of its untapped potential, the terra of San Paolo is dry and lacking nourishment.

Recently, I came across the exhibition *Quando la terra è secca* [16] by scenographer Valentina Degrada and artist Deforma, who appears in the interview opening this paper as Martina. Martina is a longtime friend who introduced me to San Paolo di Civitate one summer seven years ago, taking me to the place where her parents came from. In the exhibition, the two artists explore how imagination, the act of seeing the world with childlike eyes, can restore nourishment to a terra (understood as the relationship between humans and nature) that is dry, worn, and arid. The artists view the land as an ironic fairy tale, where the viewer is embraced by two long fabric arms carrying leaves and shrubs, and little figures fishing for drops of rain. (Deforma, 2025) [Fig.22]

They imagine, they invite to look at the land with new eyes, gentle eyes, childlike eyes.

In an interview with Martina (Deforma), she confided that she had always felt disconnected from the people of San Paolo, as if there were always a barrier—the inhabitants of a small town enclosed in their reality, and outsiders, semi-insiders, those born in a big city but somehow tied to this place. She added, "I feel more connected to the olive trees of my mother's land than to the people here." [17] Hearing her describe the olive trees, and the friendship and care she felt toward them, made me wonder: what if we began to see and perceive the territory of San Paolo as a collection of inhabitants, the olive trees as guardians, the wind as a friendly voice, the forest as a wise elder, and each individual bush, tree, and blade of grass as a living being whose existence is important to recognize and share?



[Fig. 22] Above, art exhibition *Quando la terra è secca*. Source: Deforma's Instagram account.

[16] Italian for: When the soil is dry.

[17] Mi sento più connessa agli ulivi del terreno di mia mamma che alle persone di qui (Original version, translated by the author.)



Talk to me again.
Tell me another of your stories, you know I'm never tired of them. Tell me about those places far away where you come from. Tell me about the fierce desert and the lion sun that so much resembles ours in July. Tell me about your travels, and the ancient paths you have traveled for millennia. Tell me about the taste of the sea, how you touch the shadows of the nearby mountains and how then you sink into the plain. Tell me about those white metal towers you meet in the valley, and how you give them some of your energy. Tell me about your warm breath that invades the narrow alleys of the town. Tell me about where the walls bounce you off, tell me which people you meet, the faces you caress, the hair you mess up. Tell me where you go when I hear you no more. Speak to me and keep talking to me, I will catch your whispers in the leaves of olive trees and threads of corn. Speak to me, I will always keep listening.

- to Wind

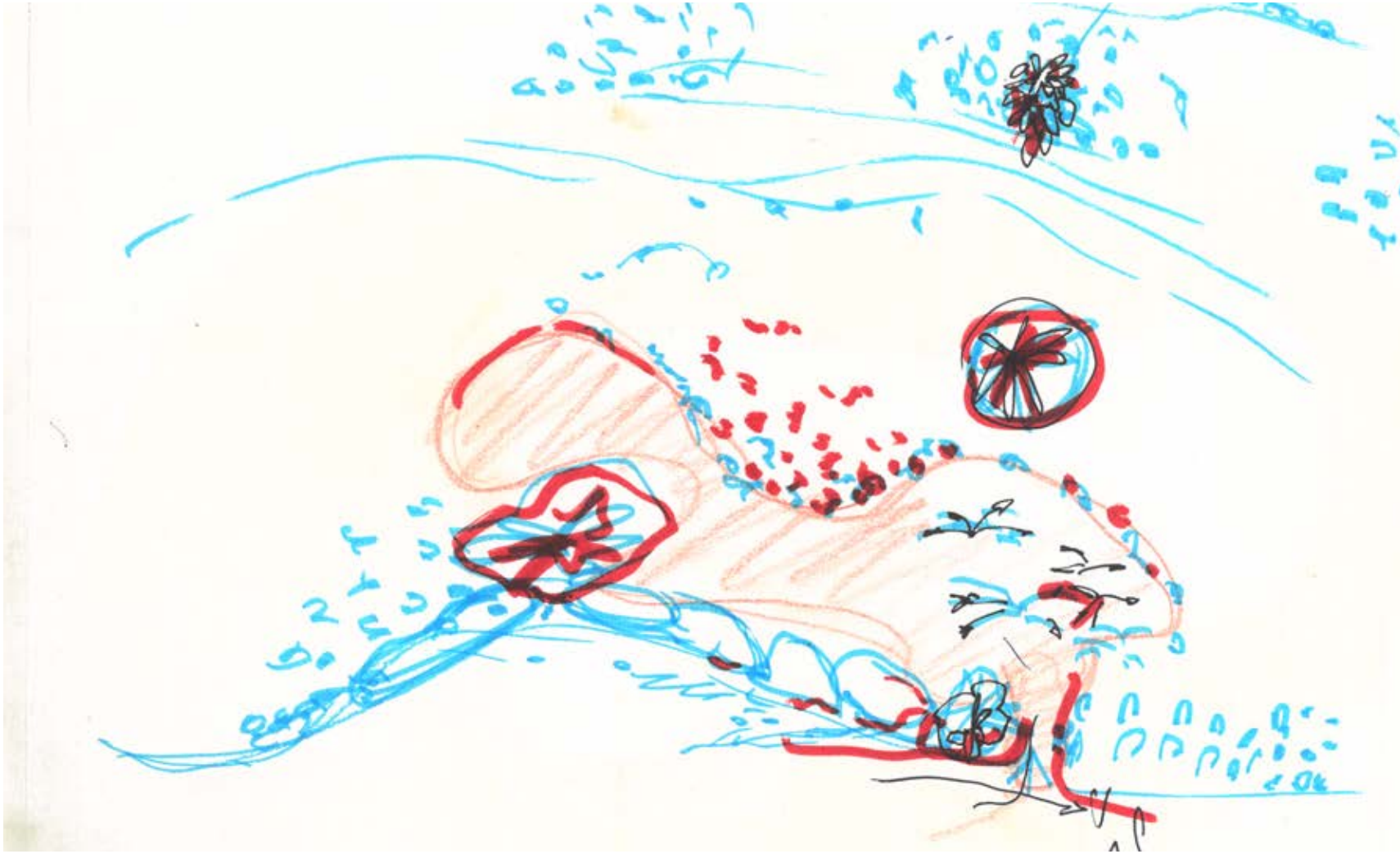


We stand alone and forgotten like a ruin that has lost its old meaning.
In the wind we were able to catch some whispered memories: we had brothers and sisters, they covered hills, valleys, and mountains; but we are too young to remember.
Our home was so vast that we could disappear into the horizon. We held the earth, as one holds the arms of a dear friend, we were the guar-dians of the tiniest, the refuge of the immigrants, home of the wilds. In us dwelt a thousand thousand of them and we knew all the names by heart.
Now of us nothing remains but fragments: our memory, our home, our family. We are no longer guardians, we can no longer protect the land that slips away from our grasp, we can no longer give shelter, we no longer share secrets with our brothers and sisters, we do not know where they are and how to reach them. Around us there is rigor, pieces of land controlled by one of those nations we have helped; they have used us, halved and forgotten.
We linger on the edges, follow the streams, repopulate the abandonment. We live in the scraps, but we do not lose hope.

- Bosco Santuario Madonna del Ponte



[Fig. 23] Drawing of the site, inspired by the work of Alberto Ponis. By the author.



[Fig. 25] Drawing of the site, inspired by the work of Alberto Ponis.
By the author.



[Fig. 24] Drawing of the site, inspired by the work of Alberto Ponis.
By the author.

Italian architect Alberto Ponis dedicated most of his career to exploring this theme. Ponis was born near Genoa; he began his studies in Florence, after which he moved to London to continue his architectural training (Brandolini, 2014, p.11). In 1963, Ponis moved to Sardinia, where he found fertile ground for his projects. He began experimenting with the relationship between landscape and architecture, studying the landscape through photography, sketches, and paintings. He fell in love with Sardinia, its history, its rural architectural traditions, and reinterpreted this knowledge in his projects. Ponis treats architecture as an extension of the landscape; architecture infiltrates, asking permission from rocks, trees, and shrubs. His work begins with a detailed mapping of the landscape; almost obsessively, he visits the site dozens of times in order to draw a 1:20 plan. From this, Ponis developed principles whose care strongly echoes the exhibition by the two artists mentioned above [Fig.26] Fraternal embrace, respectful distance, etc. Ponis treats, dialogues with, and considers the landscape as a friend.

In this sense, and linking back to the exhibition, one way of interacting with the territory that helped shape my project is land art. The incredible power of land art lies in its ability to engage with the landscape without serving a functional purpose. Land art makes you engage with it from different perspectives (Weilacher, 1999, p. 21). An example of this relationship is the work



[Fig. 26] **Above, Alberto Ponis' principles. Source:** Brandolini, L. (2014). *The inhabited pathway: The built work of Alberto Ponis in Sardinia.*



[Fig. 27] A wall that went on a walk, by Andy Goldsworthy. Source: https://grizedaleforestsculpturepark.wordpress.com/taking-a-wall-for-a-walk/

A Wall Went for a Walk by artist Andy Goldsworthy. The artist engages with England's Grizedale Forest through a dry stone wall, typical of the region, which snakes among the trees. The wall, normally thought of as a static construction, is here imagined as a wandering element that follows the topography of the land, developing a close yet fragile relationship with the vegetation. The wall circumscribes tree growth, just as wind, branches, or fallen trunks affect and reshape the construction (Harvey, 2022). Goldsworthy aimed to create a work expressing a line in sympathy with its surroundings, curving gently around a tree rather than cutting it down (Harvey, 2022). [Fig.27]

It is precisely in this care, in intervening with permission, delicately yet with an almost childlike desire to play, that I see a way to restore nourishment to the land. A way of conceiving architecture that blends with land art, a way that sets aside function as the primary purpose of design and shifts the focus to the emotion and feeling of understanding the land as a living and dear organism.

Radicarsi as Care

Nourishing the land, taking care of it. But what does it mean to take care of a place?

Alberto Magnaghi tells us that to take care of a place, one must inhabit it concretely (Magnaghi; Giusti, 1990), and to do that, even before, one must develop a *coscienza di luogo* that is:

"[…] the necessity for local communities to reclaim the knowledge and reproductive capacities of their living and working environments; to autonomously reconstruct environmental and productive know-how in deeply innovative ways."[16] (Magnaghi, 2020, p.26).

In San Paolo di Civitate, several local associations work toward this goal. They seek to preserve the memory of trades that have fallen into disuse, festivals that have been abandoned, and places and customs lost over time. In particular, I had the pleasure of getting to know the cultural association DeSaleo and the activities of the Civic Archaeological Museum.

The DeSaleo association focuses on preserving the community memory of the town; its members scour cellars in search of old photos and documents to maintain a complete picture of village life across different eras, while advising me to speak with the elders, for it is in them that the true memory of the town is kept. Meanwhile, the Civic Museum promotes workshops for children to explore San Paolo's archaeological heritage.

Particularly noteworthy was a participatory design workshop held on March 21, 2023, organized through

[16] Ripartendo dalla necessità per le comunità locali di riappropriarsi dei saperi e delle capacità riproduttive dei propri ambienti di vita e di lavoro; di ricostruire autonomamente sapienze ambientali e produttive profondamente innovative. (Original version, translated by the author.)







[Fig. 28] Pictures of the collaborative workshop. Source: Museo Civico di San paolo di Civitate.

the collaboration of various local entities, the University of Foggia, and the Civic Museum of San Paolo. [Fig.28]

The workshop, open to the public, began with a visit to the Tiati-Tanum Apulum-Civitate archaeological area to experience firsthand the concrete value of the territory, walking part of the *Tratturo Magno* and stopping at the ruins of the Roman amphitheater. It concluded with a meeting to define actions to be implemented by the institutions responsible for protecting, enhancing the territory.

On one hand, there are these activities that consciously aim to create active, collective participation; on the other hand, some initiatives carry an outdated legacy that doesn't always achieve its intended purpose, such as the creation of a digital community map. The map was created by inviting residents to fill out an online form to identify the most interesting places in the town. Unfortunately, although the initiative certainly had an interesting starting point, its execution, due to its structure and graphic presentation, —that tends to present the locations as isolated points of interest rather than meaningful places to explore and connect with— fails to capture and convey the importance and beauty of the places marked. [Fig.29]

There is, therefore, a living will to bring people back to rediscover the territory, and there are funds available to advance this intention. Yet the challenge lies in leaving behind an outdated mindset in pursuing this goal. In any case, what matters is continuing to insist on spreading awareness and knowledge of one's land, as it is a fundamental step toward developing a bond with it marked with care.



[Fig. 29] Comunity Map. Source: Museo Civico San Paolo di Civitate.

5. *After us, after our roots*

After us, After our roots

Abandonment is a ghost that haunts the destiny of San Paolo di Civitate, and with it, my project as well. I have often wondered what would happen if my project were built and then abandoned, as has been the case with many buildings in the countryside. [Fig. 30]

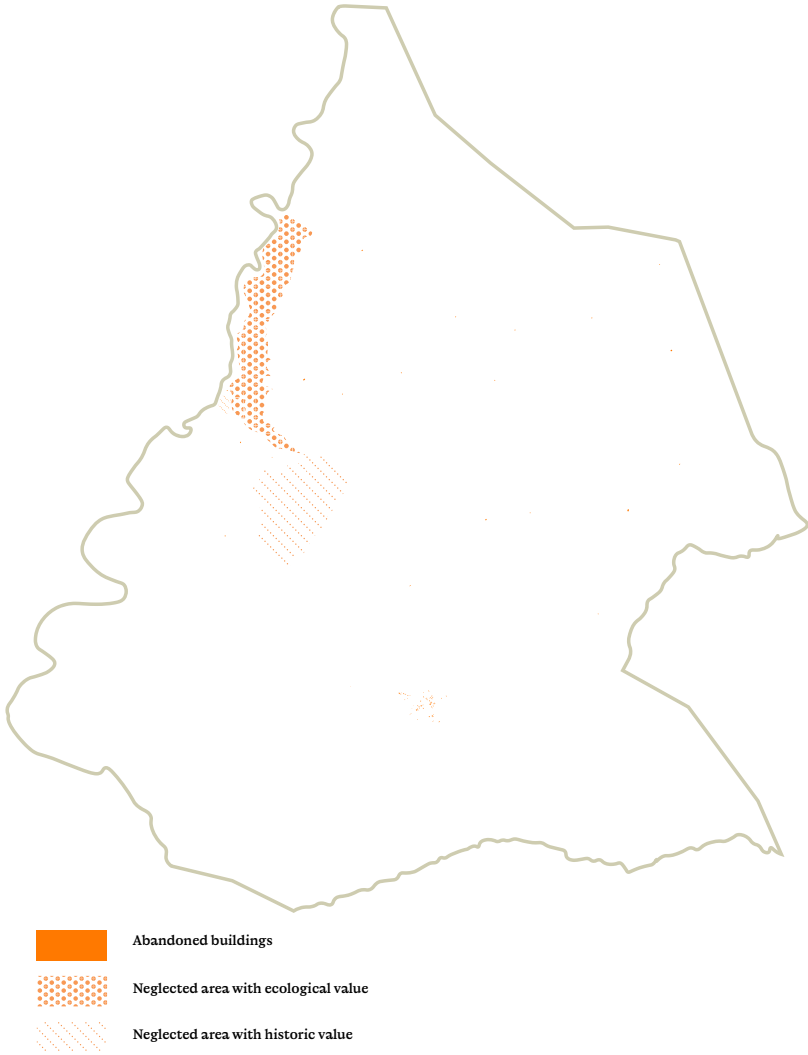
> "If at the origin of a foundation there was a blessing, at the origin of abandonment there is a curse, a blasphemy. That is why the cruelest curse says: 'may grass grow in front of your doorstep.'"[17] (Teti, 2022, p.24)

comments Teti regarding abandonment. And I wondered: what if the grass growing in front of the doorstep were something positive? What if my design could be digested by the earth once it no longer serves its purpose?

Geographer Caitlin DeSilvey offers an interesting perspective on abandonment: "Sometimes practical taking care may involve acts of repair and maintenance that secure the material fabric of the thing; at other times, taking care may involve withholding repair and letting the thing carry on with its changes." (DeSilvey, 2017, p.180). Decay and abandonment can be repopulated by the landscape, by grass, trees, birds, rodents, and foxes struggling to find their space in an increasingly humanized countryside. This could open space for a less human-centric and more post-human perspective (DeSilvey, 2017).

From this, the project is formulated within two alternative scenarios: on one hand, the possibility

[17] Se all'origine di una fondazione c'era una benedizione, all'origine di un abbandono c'è una maledizione, una bestemmia. Per questo la maledizione piú crudele recita: che ti possa crescere l'erba davanti alla porta della casa (Original version, translated by the author.)



[Fig. 30] Above, a map of the abbandoned and negleted areas of San Paolo di Civitate. By the author.

that it functions and is cared for and maintained; on the other, the possibility that it is progressively abandoned. In this perspective, the choice of local materials, such as stone and brick, becomes decisive, as their durability and rates of decay directly influence the lifespan and evolution of the construction.

Therefore, we speak of introducing a fourth dimension, because as the sculptor Walter Maria says: "The artist who works with earth, works with time." (De Maria, cited by Weilacher, 1999, p.21) Thinking and designing with the landscape, especially in a context where the theme of abandonment is highly present, also means accounting for mutations and transformations of the living organism that is the earth over time. It means interpreting the grass growing in front of the doorstep not as something negative, but as an opportunity to shift focus from the human, supporting an eco-sustainable perspective.



Somewhere around San Paolo

1Girl: (shouting) Hey you! Girl from Amsterdam, did you find what you were searching?

Adele: Hey, good to see you! Yes, I've been finding so many interesting stuff. There's so much history behind this village.

1G: Yeah, we learn that in school. The battle of Civitate and etc... But other than that there's no much else here. I need to go, good luck with your stuff!

A: Good luck to you too.

- One of the two teenager girls from the bus stop

6. Conclusion

San Paolo di Civitate was built around the countryside, which for centuries represented the cornerstone of its economy, identity, and culture. When this foundation collapsed, when the countryside ceased to hold the same economic and cultural significance it once had, trust in the territory was progressively lost.

Yet, San Paolo di Civitate is not only countryside: it is a complex landscape shaped by millennia of history, of human and natural transformations. *Terra* is not only what surrounds the town, but also the ground on which it stands and the very matter from which its oldest buildings were constructed. The word *terra* has guided the identification of different design points through which the project takes shape.

The first point looks to the significant places of the landscape (*Terra* as Landscape): the town, the area of the ancient settlement to the north, and the countryside that connects them. The second point interprets the countryside as a place of collective exploration, reworking the language of the micro-architectures already present (*Terra* as Countryside). The third point considers the materials and the very composition of the soil: bricks, stones, but also the subsoil, recalling the ancient tradition of food preservation in underground spaces (*Terra* as Soil). Finally, understanding the land as a sense of belonging has made it possible to imagine who the future users of the project might be: mainly locals, but inviting outsiders as well (*Terra* as Sense of Belonging).

What emerges from these interpretations is a possible response to the problem of the loss of trust in the territory. Circling back to my research question, I believe that the countryside can find a new role if it shifts its identity from being merely a backdrop for economic productivity to becoming, alongside that role, a space of lived experience; where people can walk, touch, sense, and engage with the landscape in ways that reconnect them to its history, beauty, and richness. In this perspective, *terra* becomes a catalyst for exploration. By approaching the countryside as a place to be rediscovered both bodily and collectively, it regains meaning and opens itself to new forms of care and participation.

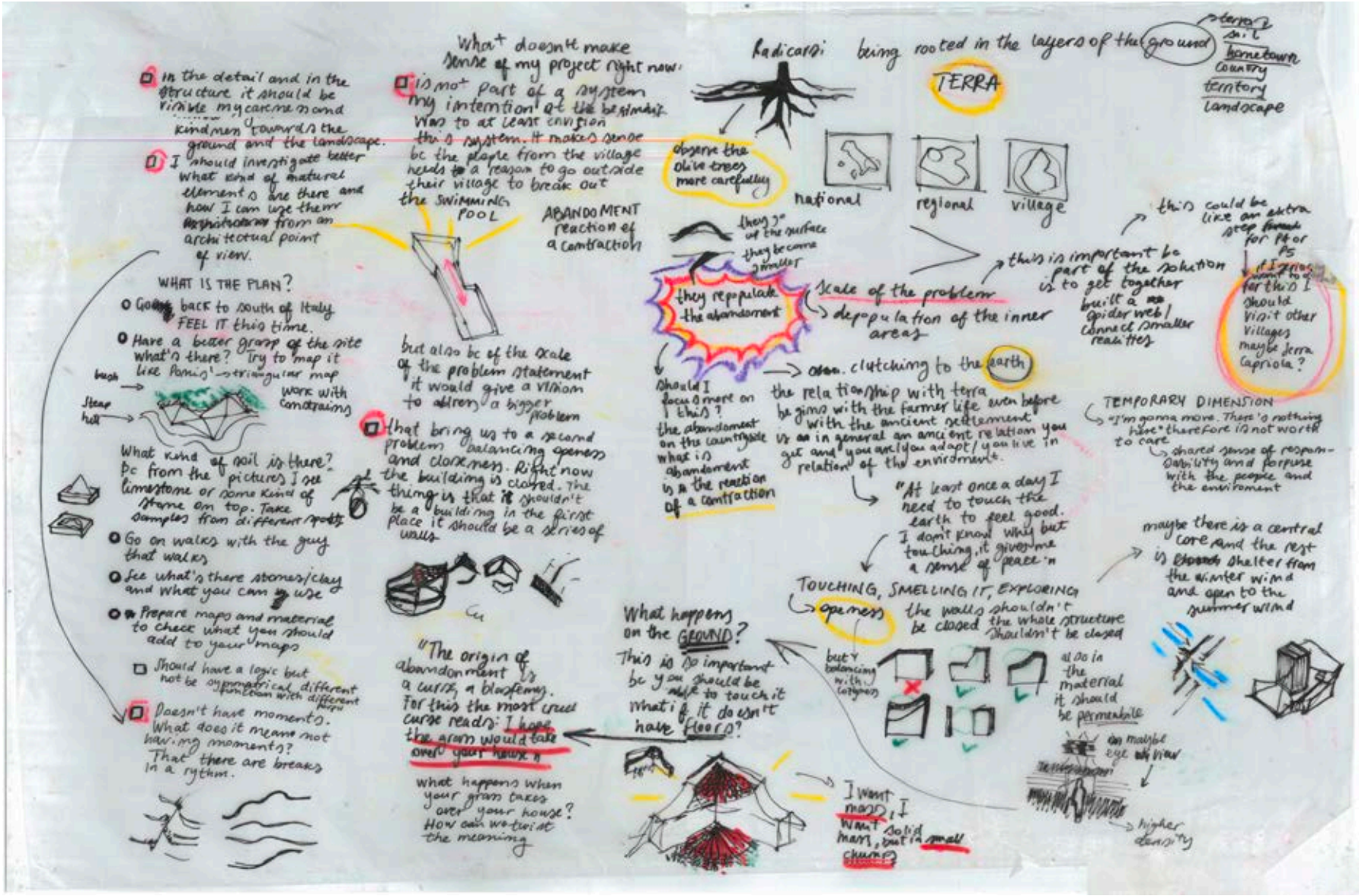
Furthermore, the concept of *radicarsi* has been understood as intention, that is, the way in which the project is conceived, experienced, and realized. What is its purpose concerning San Paolo? The answer is that it must invite a reappropriation of the territory, beginning with the fundamental act of observing, as the starting point for a deeper dialogue that unfolds through a bodily exploration of the landscape: walking, touching, sensing (*Radicarsi* as Exploration).

For this to happen, a strong imaginative component is required (*Radicarsi* as Nourishment): interventions must be conceived almost playfully, engaging with volumes, with the presence of diverse vegetation, and with the variety of panoramas, in order to rebuild a relationship of friendship and reciprocal love with the territory. Finally, the

project envisions itself as the outcome of collaborative work with various public institutions already active in this direction (*Terra* as Care).

At the same time, it is essential to consider abandonment as a living element of the project and thus to embrace the temporal dimension. Materials, forms, and spatial interventions must be understood as part of a vital process, capable of transformation, decay, and reintegration into the natural rhythms of the land. In this way, the project becomes an invitation to redefine our relationship with nature, to recognize the post-human, and to foster an architecture that exists in harmony with its environment.
Ultimately, this project affirms that caring for the land through design, imagination, and community is an act of empathy. To root oneself does not mean merely to claim a place, but to establish a reciprocal relationship, in which architecture and landscape evolve together, nourishing and sustaining one another, telling a story destined to continue long after we are gone.

6. *Reflection*



[Fig. 31] Resolution diagram. By the author.

"There's nothing here."
"Over the years, nothing has been built."

I started from this statement to begin thinking about my project. During the first semester, I focused my energies on understanding what I could add to revive a village on the verge of abandonment. It seemed to me that the only solution to the challenges of San Paolo di Civitate was to introduce new attractive functions, create new activities connected to the central theme of my thesis: terra. For this reason, during the P2 phase, my proposal consisted of imagining a ceramics workshop and a communal kitchen.

Although I was not entirely convinced, the words of the residents resonated like an imperative: "there is nothing here; someone should do something."

My mistake was interpreting these statements too literally: if there is nothing, then one must add functions, one after another, following a traditional design, a building placed in a culturally significant area of the municipality. At that time, my research was based on the idea of terra as the result of three distinct layers: natural, cultural, and urban. The goal was to understand the complexity of a stratified landscape that framed San Paolo di Civitate in overlapping layers. Yet I soon realized that this rigid approach was limiting my understanding.

This rigidity was also reflected in the design: two buildings hosting the respective functions, with a central amphitheater overlooking the valley. The intervention was limited to this structure and, consequently, did not achieve the main objective of reconnecting people with the territory.

By May, I decided to change direction, modifying both the project and the structure of my research, while retaining some of the insights gained. [Fig. 31] My greatest challenge at that moment was reconnecting with the core of my work: the feeling of exploring and rooting myself in a *terra* conceived as a complex, living system. Therefore, I organized a field visit to San Paolo, beginning to explore the countryside on foot. As I walked, I started to perceive the landscape as populated by presence: trees, hills, shrubs; elements I wanted to integrate into the project with care and sensitivity.

Being there made me realize that, in fact, the small town already contained much richness, and a large building intervention was unnecessary. Instead, the design had to be in harmony with the landscape. I thus decided to rethink the research, placing the word *terra* at the center and exploring different scales of intervention: the landscape, the countryside, the soil, and the sense of belonging. From this emerged a method ranging from a 1:10,000 scale to 1:500, down to 1:20 details, which allowed me to clarify who I was truly designing for. The answer was clear: primarily the town's inhabitants. I aimed to create spaces experienced as special moments, that could spark the invite: "I

will take you to a dear place I know", while also opening the project to external visitors, attracted to an architecture that blends with the landscape and brings renewed visibility to a historically and culturally rich village.

The concept of *radicarsi* guided the project in multiple directions. I sought to accompany people through paths and moments of discovery, encourage playful, almost childlike interaction with nature, volumes, and views, and envision the project's initiation with the support of local organizations and regional funds already present in the area.

Rethinking my research in this way was essential to developing a project that finally aligns with my initial goal: structuring a complex intervention capable of highlighting the multiple facets of an equally complex landscape, conceived as a living organism. The objective was, and remains, to allow people to connect with the territory with care and an almost childlike sensitivity.

In conclusion, my graduation project addresses the critical issue of reconnecting rural communities with their environment, focusing particularly on San Paolo di Civitate, a village emblematic of the challenges faced by many rural areas in southern Italy and beyond. The work explores how a symbiotic relationship with *terra*, a fundamental element of local identity and culture, can be reestablished through a design that fosters exploration, participation, and care.
The project challenges a conventional approach to architecture focused solely on functionality, embracing instead interaction with the landscape even without a fixed purpose, grounded in tactile and emotional experience. By integrating the concepts of *radicarsi* and *terra*, the project proposes a masterplan composed of targeted interventions that highlight special moments within the landscape, enabling people to rediscover their *terra*.

Beyond the specific case of San Paolo, this experience also outlines what others can learn from the process: the importance of reinterpreting absence not as emptiness to be filled, but as potential to be revealed; the value of working across multiple scales, from territorial analysis to detailed design; and the role of walking, observing, and engaging with *terra* in unconventional, almost childlike, ways in order to generate a new perspective on how we live a landscape.

Furthermore, throughout this process I often considered the possible destinies of the village. What if my project failed to bring new life, and San Paolo continued to fade? What if the village kept disappearing, despite every effort? I am aware that architecture cannot solve every problem. What it can offer, however, is an interpretation, the beginning of a discussion that is more conceptual than definitive.

In this sense, I began to reflect on abandonment not only as a loss but as part of a wider

cycle in which things are born, grow, and eventually decline. When we speak of abandonment, we must ask: from whose perspective? From a human viewpoint, it may seem like emptiness and decay. Yet from plants, animals, insects, the same place can become a site of renewal, of reoccupation, of life returning in other forms.

For this reason, I no longer see abandonment as a condition to be feared or erased, but rather as a process that can inform design. Instead of resisting it, we might consider abandonment as a criterion for architecture, a lens through which to engage with the landscape and its transformations.

To conclude, for myself, the project underscored the necessity of of allowing the research to transform when confronted with lived experience, and the potential of architecture not as the imposition of new forms, but as the cultivation of existing relationships between people and place.

These are insights I carry forward, both as lessons for future projects and as a contribution to a broader methodological framework for sustainable cultural and environmental reconnection.



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