

FROM URBAN TO RURAL CREATIVITY. HOW THE “CREATIVE CITY” APPROACH IS TRANSPOSED IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

The creative industry sector has mostly focused on urban areas. However, the attention to cultural capital in rural areas is increasing. This paper concentrates on the role of creative industries in fostering the regeneration of rural areas. The existing literature on cultural capital in rural areas is presented, and selected examples of artistic activities in rural contexts are discussed as a stimulus for encouraging a heritage-driven rural regeneration.

Keywords

Rural communities; Creative cities; Art and festivals

The creative city model: an introduction

From the early 1980s onwards, many post-industrial cities have started promoting cultural policies with the aim to revitalize local economy and promote a different urban and social development. Consequently, new concepts have been introduced, such as: creative city, creative class, creative milieu, creative industries. These new concepts have been showing a relevant role of the arts in culture-led strategies and therefore in urban policy [Bassett 1993], where the concept of place is always present at different spatial scales [INTELI 2011; Comunian *et al.* 2010]. The definition of urban policies related to creativity has been mainly rooted on an economic perspective, shifting traditional notions of culture as art and heritage to a view of culture as an economic asset [Garcia 2004], thus adopting a cultural economy approach [Amin and Thrift 2007] and giving to other facets of creativity a relatively less important role [Pratt 2011].

During the last decades of the 20th century, culture started to play an important role within urban development as a valuable producer of marketable city spaces and as a commodity with market value [Garcia 2004] to be exploited for achieving urban regeneration of specific hubs, districts, neighbourhoods, or cities. Opening up museums and theatres to a wide public, supporting ethnic and minority arts in deprived neighbourhoods, investing in studios and marketing strategies especially for establishing cultural

districts, launching development projects for art districts in inner city areas, launching cultural events and festivals for encourage cultural tourism, investing in public art [Bianchini 1999; Kong 2000] are some of the overall culture-led initiatives where the arts have covered a key role for triggering and encouraging urban regeneration.

These culture-related notions are linked not only with entrepreneurial, space and place concepts, but also with people and community. Culture-based creativity is associated to the ability of people, mainly artists, to think imaginatively or metaphorically, to allow the development of a new vision, an idea or a product [KEA 2009] and creative cities are therefore considered poles of attraction of creative people [Lazzeretti et al. 2008], which in turn can enhance the creation of innovative businesses. Moreover, the creativity of artists as been considered as able to synthesize mutual interconnections among the natural, social, cultural, political and economic environments [Bianchini 1999], assuming great potential for regenerating different urban contexts. This growing relationship between creativity and territory has been synthesized also with the concept of “creative ecosystem”, based on three dimensions: economy, place and people [INTELI 2011]. It is intended as an environment of excellence based on creative assets that generates socio-economic growth and development. Traditionally, the concept of creative ecosystem is oriented to big cities and metropolises, but small territorial areas can have a role to play in the creative economy by developing forms of creative ecosystems alternative to metropolitan ones [INTELI 2011] as well as in regenerating rural communities and territories.

Although some authors justify the need of spatial proximity for «benefiting from the effects of a quasi-unrestrained propagation of knowledge and technological performance» [Valeriu et al. 2016, 32], nowadays the accessible-remote duality is even more relevant than the urban-rural one. It is then crucial to focus on improving accessibility [INTELI 2011] also in terms of internet infrastructure [Roberts and Townsend 2016] instead of concentrating only on the population densities as key factors to boost the cultural capital in rural areas, thereby contributing to a diverse economy for rural development. The contribution of the arts in developing cultural and creative employment and enterprises and in revitalizing deprived territories has been recognized not only in urban areas but also in rural contexts, spanning a variety of activities, from informal activities and professional artist practices to creative business enterprises [Duxbury and Campbell 2011]. These activities have distinct features arising from the specificities of rural contexts, therefore they are not smaller-scale examples of urban art activities, as frequently people think, but alternative example of arts typical of rural contexts [Brotman 2007]. Building on the recognition of distinct peculiarities in rural contexts, the paper aims at contributing to the discussion around the specific role of art to foster regeneration in rural settings. In section 1, the existing literatures and concepts of cultural capital in rural areas as a driver for sustainable development and new economies are reviewed. In section 2, selected examples of arts-related activities that are commonly undertaken in rural contexts as a trigger for encouraging a heritage-led rural regeneration are presented. Discussion and conclusions are described in the final section.

The cultural capital in rural areas

According to the OECD typologies, 35% of the European regions are classified as predominantly rural and 14% of European regions are classified as remote rural regions, covering the 49% of the overall Europe [Brezzi et al. 2011]. Although these areas present a low population density, they collect a considerable number of people. The OECD proposes a classification of the rural intensity of the European territory based both on the percentage of population living in local rural units, and the access to populated centres, using an indicator based on the percentage of the national surface. The resulting classification consists of five types of regions: predominantly urban, intermediate close to a city, intermediate remote, predominantly rural close to a city and predominantly rural remote.

According to EUROSTAT¹, 28% of the EU-28 population lived in a rural area in 2015, with a somewhat higher share living in towns and suburbs (32%), while 40% of the EU-28 population lived in cities. Moreover, around 47% of European gross added value is created in intermediate and predominantly rural areas², showing a relevant economic potential.

EU rural areas are characterized by a wide range of different natural environments and endowments. They embody outstanding examples of Cultural and Natural Heritage that need not only to be preserved but also to be promoted as a catalyst of economic competitiveness and sustainable and inclusive growth. Therefore, place-strengths of rural areas, such as quality of life, landscape peculiar culture and heritage, can attract and retain creative workers. However, most rural areas deal with chronic economic, social and environmental problems, resulting in unemployment, disengagement, depopulation, marginalization or loss of cultural, biological and landscape diversity. The population of predominantly rural regions is projected to fall by 7.9 million people by 2050 in EU-28 countries, as part of a global trend of urbanization [ESPON 2011].

Despite this, developing the creative sector in rural areas has the potential to generate sustainable high-quality enterprise and employment opportunities and contribute to rural diversification [White 2013; Selada et al. 2011] and regeneration. Indeed, the rural creative economy is receiving increasing attention: some scholars have claimed that creative processes occur through networks and flows of people and information between city and the country, at regional, inter-regional and inter-community levels, and consist of scattered networks and nodes, hubs and incubators [Roberts and Townsend 2016]. Less dense areas can be considered attractive for whom is in search of a more rural quality of life, and the presence of a creative class in these places can generate an environment for job creation and wealth growth [INTELI 2011]. Elements such as the

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_rural_areas_in_the_EU&oldid=391832 [September 2019].

² https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Distribution_of_population_,_2011_-_%25,_V2.png&oldid=137887 [September 2019].

landscape, remoteness, natural surroundings, waterways, lighting, space and heritage are named as important for allowing creativity to thrive [White 2013].

There is also another part of the literature arguing that creativity is intrinsic to rural communities and can be observed as a strategy for economic adaptation, an alternative to out-migration, and a tool for narrating and negotiating local identity in the context of change [Woods 2012]. Aiming at describing the evolutionary process that many contemporary rural spaces are undergoing, Mitchell [2013] has coined the phrase “creative enhancement” to describe the process that is potentially unfolding in some rural spaces that are transitioning from a production-based, to a multi-functional economic state. It has been defined as the addition of one or more innovative functions to a space that does not cause displacement of the existing functions.

These perspectives find confirmation in many Arts and Creativity- based regeneration initiatives already in place all over Europe and beyond, aimed at enhancing the cultural, economic and social capitals of the local communities overturning the current decreasing population and development trends, thus demonstrating their potential for achieving a sustainable growth. Among them, the H2020 RURITAGE³ project considers art and festivals as one of the systemic areas of innovation to be enhanced in rural territories, where cultural and natural heritage is considered as a key driver and enabler for sustainable development in all its dimensions. RURITAGE - *Rural regeneration through systemic heritage-led strategies* is a four-year EU-funded research project (Grant agreement No 776465), initiated in June 2018, which strives to enable rural regeneration through cultural and natural heritage. Throughout the RURITAGE project, 13 rural areas have been selected as Role Models. They can be considered as successful cases where rural areas have been regenerated thanks to cultural and natural heritage. “Role Models” practices are analyzed to be transferred to six selected “Replicators”, representing local communities within rural territories that are in the process of building their own heritage-led regeneration strategies, but need to improve their skills, knowledge and capacity building.

Arts and creativity in rural areas: approaches and good practices

The possible contribution of the arts for revitalizing or re-imagining rural communities has been already investigated by a number of scholars [Campbell et al. 2009; Selada et al. 2012] and interesting examples are currently in action. Therefore, to better understand the potential and the effects that the arts and creativity might have for regenerating rural areas, an empirical case study analysis has been undertaken. Some valuable example of rural regeneration through arts have been collected and analysed to identify common elements and peculiarities that are more specific for rural sites, that can be transferred in other contexts. The selected practices have been divided into three main groups (i.e. land art and art in nature, street art and festivals and pop-up events), by considering the diverse and most frequent forms and uses of arts in the territories and the involvement of rural community.

³ www.ruritage.eu [September 2019].

Land art and Art in nature

This category collects examples where art is used in close contact with nature, shaping landscapes in very diverse ways through permanent works or using more ephemeral art. Since the end of the 1960s, several artistic movements, such as the Land art [Tufnell 2006] and Art in nature movements [Grande 2004], have been playing a pioneering role in the contemporary art, by reconsidering the role of arts in reshaping the space and the natural environment. Within this category, two main approaches for the artworks design can be distinguished: permanent art, characterized by strongly impressive, long lasting and immutable artworks within the land over time; and ephemeral art, consisting in intimate, introspective interventions, conceived as part of a specific space and time at the place of intervention, where the materials used are exclusively natural, often collected in situ (e.g. wood, stone, leaves, earth, flowers). Both types consist on a poetic and evocative form of art, capable of enhancing the natural territory. These forms of art aim to involve and entertain the public, bringing them closer to the traditions, culture and nature of the local territory stimulating ecological and environmental consciences and therefore regeneration and protection of the territory, as well as cultural and tourist development.

An interesting example of permanent art in nature is Arte Sella, a contemporary outdoor art exhibition in the Trentino's mountains (Italy), promoted by Arte Sella Association and characterized by the use of natural materials collected in situ. Founded in 1986, the exhibition currently hosts more than 50 artworks attracting thousands of people every year. This long experience is based on some key principles, that are to bring visitors closer to contemporary art and the multiple attractions of the territory as well as its environmental problems in a way that is respectful of the natural heritage.

Arte Sella involves new artists every year, by letting them work together to create new artworks in nature, using only natural materials, enhancing the environment and the landscape. Local volunteers are engaged in managing and organizing the initiatives and in supporting the artists for realizing the artworks. Educational programmes targeted to students, teachers and educators are organized as well in collaboration with local stakeholders, to promote liveability, biodiversity, the environment and the quality of life through art. Finally, a Scientific Committee has been established, with the aim of evaluating that the artists' projects are respectful of the inspiring principles of the site and safeguarding the fragile environment of the valley, by limiting the number of visitors.

Street art

Another interesting approach refers to the so-called street art. It was originally born in densely populated urban areas, as a spontaneous artistic movement out of the ordinary places where art was shown, to communicate dissent. Can graffiti, graffiti-logos, stencil art, tags, are some of the artworks designed by street artists. Nowadays this form of art is being considered a low-cost intervention to regenerate public spaces, especially in the peripheral districts.

Street art has also been frequently used in rural contexts with similar purposes. Murals have deep and multifaceted meanings and reflect heritage, politics and identity of a place [Skinner and Joliffe, 2017] and are frequently promoted by local communities, concurring in revitalizing and strengthening local heritage and traditions.

The Unfinished Museum of Urban Art (MIAU – Museum Inacabado de Arte Urbano) is a street art museum inspired by these principles, hosting more than 150 artworks of over 70 artists and attracting many visitors every year. The initiative was born in Fanzara, a Spanish village in the autonomous Region of Valencia, as a direct initiative of the municipality. MIAU is not only street art but also an alternative way of creating sense of community, sharing values and recovering memory and pride, by promoting social cohesion through art. The most important way is the 4-day annual festival launched in 2014 where artists are invited to create artworks embellishing new areas of the village. During this festival, local inhabitants host the artists, establishing a cultural exchange. The inhabitants provide the walls of their houses for the graffiti, sharing the idea and the development of the artwork with the artist. In this way, the inhabitants become experts and throughout the year can give information to visitors describing with pride and enthusiasm, the work present in their home's walls.

Festivals and pop-up events

Inhabitants of rural areas are already familiar with festivals and pop-up events since ancient times festivals, and fairs have always been organized to celebrate events linked to traditions. Traditional rural festivals have always included a variety of cultural practices and activities that have enabled to promote local identity and a sense of belonging within the community [Duxbury et al. 2009] as well as to generate important economic incomes. During the time festivals and pop up events have been comprising not only traditional elements but also contemporary art and culture in general, aimed at attracting new artists, visitors and tourists, that are distant from the local culture. It is therefore important to maintain a link between the art and culture proposed by these events and the needs and traditions of local communities.

A relevant and unusual case of promoting both traditional and contemporary art events within rural areas is represented by Take Art, an association active in the Somerset (UK). In 1991, they launched a Rural Touring programme with the aim of bring the arts and culture shown in important urban hubs into the rural villages and communities of Somerset, England and Europe, through pop-up events associated with the arts, music, poetry and theatre. The initiative consists of creating a partnership with local authorities and administrations that have the interest and the financial means to develop such a collaboration in the long term. This collaboration allows to work synergistically producing social, cultural and artistic events that play an important role in maintaining the vitality of the villages, strengthening the sense of belonging and improving the well-being of the inhabitants. Over the past ten years, Take Art has presented 872 shows and supported 180 communities to develop artistic performances of various kinds. The number of spectators, mainly from rural communities, has been over 65,000.

Discussion and conclusions

The creativity-city link has been consolidated over the last two decades by the influence of the creative city thesis and its translation into policies for the development of the creative industries sector. Recent research has started to critique the assumptions that creativity is boosted more within the creative city model, documenting that creative and arts-based initiatives have been generating new development opportunities in rural and regional settings as well. This paper has focused on art-related good practices to show powerful examples of rural regeneration through the valorization of heritage and more specifically the cultural capital.

The examples provided highlight some characteristics that have to be taken into account when developing regeneration strategies in rural contexts. Indeed, art in rural areas can play a crucial role in community building and engagement. Through informal and formal community-facing and networked practices, rural creatives can enhance multiple pathways for capacity building, contributing to rural diversification in terms of economic and socio-demographic make-up of the community [Roberts and Townsend 2016]. At the same time, local inhabitants can be directly or indirectly involved in the artistic projects to develop a sense of ownership of the new cultural heritage created. Education plays also a key role for making locals more aware of the values of their territories' cultural and natural heritage. Those territories can be further valorized and enhanced by the contribution of artists, thus enabling to consider art and culture as drivers for rural regeneration. Moreover, as pointed out also by Woods [2012], the economic benefits of rural creativity may be not only direct but mainly indirect. The ultimate value of rural creativity can be deeply social, by helping rural communities reflecting on and responding to social and economic changing, bringing people together and enabling local strengths and resources to be identified. As such, rural creativity is frequently a facilitator of local economic regeneration rather than an objective of regeneration. Finally, the outstanding natural and cultural heritage present in rural territories drastically characterizes the artistic and creative approaches undertaking in these contexts, that might be similar but not the same as those applied in urban areas, giving birth to autonomous experiences. These features clearly emerge from the case studies considered.

In conclusion, creativity in rural areas cannot be neglected as a powerful tool to foster rural regeneration. There is a need for territorial policies that recognize the distinctive character, the potential and the challenges of creativity in rural economies. To this aim, distinctive rural models for creative economy should be developed, avoiding replicating or scaling creative urban agendas that have been born in large cities in favour of creative rural solutions and innovative methods based on the distinctive asset of rural territories, specialism and excellence from community based local resources. Moreover, rural areas are often under-connected to global networks of creative city-makers and they lack opportunities to connect to other rural areas – to develop peer learning and to co-create agendas and models for rural creative solutions. Therefore, a new paradigm tailored for rural communities is needed. RURITAGE

project addresses this need: it aims at generating new specific approaches and at mobilizing connections between creative businesses and organizations in rural areas by enhancing capacity building, knowledge sharing and exchange.

Focusing on the excellence of existing local Cultural and natural heritage, RURITAGE aims at building a distinctive and sustainable approach to rural sustainable development, where quality and uniqueness of the space in which the interaction takes place become the real asset to boost a creative economy⁴.

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