

Proposal for the CIVVIH Scientific Symposium, September 2024.

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The authors of the presentation are a part of the ‘Sustainable Futures Network’ at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, UK and the presentation is based on a workshop supported by all partner institutions. The visit to sites in Italy were facilitated by Paola Di Giuseppantonio Di Franco, and her team, which has been conducting ethnographic studies in this area since April 2017.

Theme: Threats and Risks

Presentation topic: **Cultural Heritage of the Displaced**, Case studies of L'Aquila, Amatrice and Accumoli, Italy.

Abstract: As a group of experts on cultural heritage, infrastructure, and health, we visited the devastated town of Amatrice and were struck by its abandonment and rich cultural heritage. The mayor, also a resident, recounted pulling his family from the rubble after the 2016 earthquake, and explained why many in temporary housing refuse to return to the newly reconstructed buildings. Conversely, the museum curator described efforts of preserving heritage items and shared stories of individuals reconstructing lost churches in miniature for emotional healing. This presentation situates the Amatrice case study within broader issues of heritage and displacement. Exploring personal and collective narratives, we examine how displacement severs cultural ties and threatens community identity, yet also re-negotiates place and place-attachment. Our presentation advocates for an interdisciplinary approach to heritage reconstruction, integrating heritage, infrastructure, and health. Our goal is to reflect on the broader implications of rebuilding historic places, as discussed within the platform of CIVVIH.

Expanded Abstract

Italy has seen numerous devastating earthquakes owing to numerous fault lines that are contained in the Apennine Mountains and run along the entire peninsula. The country is not new to having to rebuild cities after serious devastation. L'Aquila, the city that is still recovering from the absolute devastation caused by the earthquake in 2009, serves as a testimony to the very well established legal and policy framework that focuses on “a coordinated implementation of measures to remove obstacles to the resumption of normal living and working conditions, to restore essential services and to reduce the residual risk in the areas affected by the disasters, as well as the recognition of the needs for restoration of damaged public and private structures and infrastructures, as well as the damage suffered by economic and productive activities, cultural heritage and landscaping..... and the launch of first measures to deal with the above” (page 11, Disaster Recovery and Reconstruction in Italy, Red Cross and IFRC, 2016. Fifteen years after the devastating earthquake that damaged thousands of structures and made more than 65000 people homeless, the city continues to work towards reconstructing, and more importantly restoring the historic places.

Towns of Amatrice and Accumoli, located in the province of Rieti that were struck by an earthquake, much later, in 2016 are currently in a complete state ruins. Both of these places are known for their historicity. Archeological discoveries show a human presence in Amatrice from the pre-historic times and some structures from the Roman Empire were also found here. The town boasted of several historic structures from the 13th Century onwards. The complete destruction of the town after the earthquake of 2016, led the then mayor to declare that “the town is no more”.

The World monuments Watch listed Amatrice in 2018 to express a sustained international interest in the future of the town. Since then, six large public grants allowed the emergency conservation of the Museo Cola Filotesio, including stabilisation of bell tower and removal of internal debris. Since then there have been efforts to rebuild the town while introducing new infrastructure and new economies. In Accumoli too, one finds efforts to safeguard and stabilise important structures. In both these towns, the residents who remain have been rehabilitated outside the old town and organised in zones; residential, commercial, recreational. The sense of community that the old Italian towns enjoyed around the central Main Street is missing. The grief of loosing family members, as narrated by the mayor of Amatrice, a bleak future of the economy of the place and the younger generation moving out of these towns, all put together has created a psychological impact on the residents of these places. Residents do not wish to return to the old towns as the memories of the losses that followed the earthquake and the trauma it would have meant for the people who survived is difficult to overcome.

As an interdisciplinary group of experts, while we moved through the ruins of Amatrice and Accumoli, towns that were impacted by the 2016 earthquake, and interacted with various stakeholders, brought about instances where cultural heritage became an anchor to cope with the loss. The curator of the museum spoke about individuals who picked up stones from the rubble and rebuilt a model of a church as it gave him comfort. Some others picked up artefacts from the rubble that they thought were valuable. In November 2017, the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage (MiBACT) and the Museo delle Terme di Diocleziano in Rome launched an exhibition “Rinascite” (Rebirth), which featured a section of artwork collected from the rubble of Amatrice. The exhibition then was shifted to

the local museum conserved through the grant. Today, a model of the old town sits in the Center of the room with the artefacts curated around it.

In order to respond to the growing need of medical services and with a possibility of pulling the healthcare economy for the town, a large hospital is being built on the outskirts of Amatrice. Upon the insistence of the community of Amatrice, the old hospital building was retained and is in the process of getting conserved while the new large infrastructure gets built. The older structure, while historically unimportant, was one of the few public infrastructure that survived and got a new association for the community that it may not have had earlier. These instances, and many discussions point towards a deep relationship between cultural heritage, mental health and introduction of new infrastructure after a disaster.

In various parts of the world, extreme events related to climate change are likely to cause similar displacements. Brabec (2021), in her presentation at the joint meeting of IPCC, UNESCO and ICOMOS has highlighted the need to recognise and explore the role of cultural heritage in the mitigation of trauma, and the role which the heritage aspects of place attachment have in the management of trauma. Whether it is creation of a garden in the temporary homes of Accumoli, setting up shops that will specifically elaborate on the 'Amatrice sauce', nostalgic longing for familiarity through retaining an old infrastructure or being a part of creating a museum are all signs of 'longing for home'.

In a different context, responding to trauma of displacement due to communal violence in Ahmedabad (India), a community attaches itself to a dilapidated structure as a memory of what is lost. In this case, the possibility of reviving it, with continuous community consultations, has given hope for rehabilitation of relationships. Expanding on the possibilities of the role of cultural heritage for reconciliation of traumatic experiences is explored in an Indian historic city by Desai (2019), suggesting that participatory processes of rebuilding heritage places can lead to reclaiming the sense of belonging.

Experiences from these towns, while specific to the places, point at a universal relationship between cultural heritage and the ontological security of the inhabitants. While, renewal, rebuilding and rehabilitation will have a need for newer infrastructures and newer economies, the accessibility of inhabitants to their cultural heritage, agency to choose aspects of built environment that enabled their way of life and cultural practices must be recognised and respected. Including these considerations as a part of disaster mitigations and rehabilitation plans are important for the wellbeing of a global society. As CIVVIH, while we reflect on the Charters and Principles that inform historic cities and deliberate upon our responses to the new challenges posed by climate change, role of cultural heritage and heritage places must be looked at for their role in people's sense of being.

References:

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