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Iugera Pauca Tenent: The Crisis of the Historical Centre of Sulmona between Conjuncture and Structure

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Abstract: Sulmona is a town of significant historical memory, but it is currently living through a dramatic moment in its centuries-old history. Today it shows signs of a progressive demographic decrease that has been mainly due to the effects of the 2009 earthquake in the nearby city of L'Aquila. They haven't studied the structural causes of the depopulation which has taken the form of a turn-over of the traditional local residents with citizens from outside EU. It is from these fundamentals that the need for this study has arisen to implement a strategy of consolidation and revitalisation within the ancient centre of Sulmona.

Key words: sulmona, depopulation, revitalisation, cityofovid

1. Introduction

Sulmona is a town of significant historical memory, but it is currently living through a dramatic moment in its centuries-old history. In Sulmona was born Publius Ovidius Naso, one of the most significant poets of the classical era, and many important exponents of Humanism and pioneers of the art of printing, such as Ercole Ciofano. Another important historical figure is that of the hermit Pietro da Morrone, who in 1294, having become Pope with the name of Celestine V, wanted to return to the mountains of Sulmona after a few months. He is remembered by Dante Alighieri in his Divine Comedy as "the one who made the great refusal by cowardice". The city is rich in ancient monuments, such as the cathedral of s. Panfilo, the palace of the ss. Annunziata, the churches of s. Maria della Tomba, s. Caterina d'Alessandria, s.

Francesco della Scarpa, s. Francesco di Paola, s. Domenico, s. Filippo, s. Rocco, the palaces Tabassi, Sanità, Anelli-La Rocca, the "Porta Napoli", the

Aqueduct of Manfredi di Svevia, and the monastery of S. Chiara.

Very important is also the statue of Ovid in "Piazza XX Settembre", by Ettore Ferrari, one of the greatest Italian sculptors between the 19th and 20th centuries.

The engineering and architecture works of the twentieth century are also very interesting, starting from the Capograssi bridge on the Vella river designed by Riccardo Morandi, a typical structure of this author, similar in concept to the contemporary bridge on the Via Olimpica in Rome. In the new area, that develops beyond the river, numerous works were built in the second post-war period by Ina-Casa, when the central office of the institution was directed by Mario Ridolfi. They are works created by a very particular concept of social housing, sometimes based on the creation of a self-sufficient "piece" of city, with residential buildings integrated by buildings destined for social services. Opposite the bridge, next to the large volume of the new Court, the church of Cristo Re was built in the Seventies, a work in brut reinforced concrete that presents a spiral development and recalls the principle of the small church of the Madonna della Neve in Roccaraso on a larger scale,

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designed by Vincenzo Monaco with the collaboration of Mercuri himself. Not far from this sacred building we find the Cultural Services Centre, designed in the eighties by Paolo Portoghesi, who expressed the neo-baroque compositional line, characteristic of this architect and architecture critic. It should be emphasised that this building, formed by “closed” and “open” cylinders, also in brut reinforced concrete, is currently abandoned since construction defects, that caused its closure, have recently been discovered. Lastly, we must mention the FIAT Workers Houses built in the early 1970s in the area of Economic and Popular Construction (P.E.E.P.) designed by Ludovico Quaroni, another protagonist of twentieth-century

Italian architecture. This is a work that happened in Sulmona almost by chance, as it was originally intended for workers at FIAT’s plants in Libya. Colonel Gheddafi’s coup redirected these buildings to Sulmona and Termoli. The appearance of the buildings clearly reveals the original destination, as the roof is flat and the windows have an elongated shape to prevent excessive sunshine in the apartments. The prefabricated structural technique, the use of brut cement, the very rational internal distribution and the presence of the central heating system for the entire complex of four in-line slats makes the district very interesting; it has survived over the years (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Urban identification of the historical centre of Sulmona (from cstulmona.regione.abruzzo.it).

2. The Problem

In 1990 Sulmona celebrated reaching a population of 25,000 inhabitants, and aimed to grow to 30,000 by the end of the century. However, after 25 years, it now shows signs of a progressive demographic decrease. This loss has been suffered mostly by the historical centre, the most valuable section of the wider urban

area, and has been mainly due to the effects of the 2009 earthquake in the nearby city of L’Aquila. This created a real psychosis in the minds of the centre’s residents, consequently accelerating the depopulation process by moving out to the suburban “P.E.E.P.” (Piano Edilizia Economica Popolare) area — built in the mid-seventies.

3. The Current Situation

The current situation is extremely delicate as the crisis affects many sectors of urban life. Despite the advance of “sovereign” and “populist” parties in the recent political and regional elections, phenomena such as intolerance towards foreigners from critical areas of the Arab world, from Eastern Europe and Africa, do not seem to have reached dangerous levels, especially as the immigrants have been employed in work environments that the locals have abandoned if not a priori rejected, such as assistance to the elderly, construction, and agriculture. Furthermore, they have contributed to the survival of many primary schools with the registration of their children and have chosen, as residences, buildings of the ancient centre abandoned by the locals before and after 2009. We also note the presence of guests from the richest countries of Northern Europe, in particular from the Britain, who have found a good quality of life at affordable prices in Sulmona, as in its surroundings, as well as a healthy and mild climate compared to that of their countries of origin. Brexit, in this case, complicated the situation, interrupting a positive trend that seemed destined to grow continuously. In general, the community of Sulmona has not been able to exploit, if not minimally, the social and cultural potential of the presence of different nationalities, remaining closed in their own habits and way of thinking. The building crisis was then inextricably linked with that of commerce, as the high cost of shop rentals became unsustainable with the current collapse in the value of real estate, especially in the historic city centre. Along Corso Ovidio there is a progressive closure of the shops that from the southern zone, traditionally weaker, reached its northern part, and now is fatally reaching the city centre. In fact it is a structural crisis of trade, caused also by e-commerce — the recent internet sales system that has led to a change in the relationship of “trust” between buyer and seller even in the centres of the Italian province — and from the expansion of the shopping centres that

produced what Bruno Zevi called “the suction” from the ancient centre in the outlying areas of the town. It must be emphasized that the “sucked up” population considers shopping centres as a place to pass the time and not to make purchases, as demonstrated by the shops located in the large structures that are often desolate, despite the great walk outside them. An attempt has been made twice to propose an alternative form of sale called “natural shopping centre”, where the commercial area coincided with the entire historic centre in which the shops should have been associated together offering high quality, common services and prices agreed with the Municipal Administration. However, this proposal remained a theory, failing to materialize in any way. The main urban issue caused by the earthquake is precisely the closure of the “Liceo Ovidio” in Piazza XX Settembre, a historic building located in the centre of the ancient city whose activity guaranteed daily vitality from the early morning until early afternoon, with a reflection until late in the evening. In this regard, it should be remembered that in the complex of the Liceo Ovidio there is also the Municipal Library, equipped with a conspicuous number of books specialized on Ovid, whose ten-year closure entailed incalculable damage to the volumes preserved in its premises. During the recovery, started by the Abruzzo Region of the Celestinian Abbey, located at the foot of Mount Morrone at a distance of a few kilometers from the historic center, a proposal had been made for the temporary transfer of the books of the Municipal Library to a restored wing of the “Cortile dei Nobili”, but the Superintendence disagreed because it would have deprived the historical centre, albeit temporarily, of a function considered vital. To date, however, the books remain closed in abandoned rooms and destined to remain closed for years. It is clear that the effects of the 2009 earthquake, which was also strong in Sulmona that was excluded from the tax benefits enjoyed by many other municipalities, including neighboring ones, has amplified a crisis that has

gradually turned into a structural one. In fact, many local companies had a very strong relationship with the city of L'Aquila, destroyed by the earthquake ten years ago; while the firms of L'Aquila have rightly received State aids to be able to rise again, those of Sulmona have not enjoyed such benefits and have thus encountered great difficulties. Yet the earthquake phenomenon is a constant in city life, characterized in the past by similar, equally tragic events, such as the major ones of 1349, 1456, and in particular of November 3, 1706. In fact, an inscription on a baroque portal of the historic centre reads: "Nell'anno del Signore 1710, quarto dal terremoto, quando la città più volte messa alla prova da simile evento, crollò tutta quanta intera" (In the year of the Lord 1710, fourth since the earthquake, when the city was repeatedly tested by such an event, entirely collapsed). There were in fact a thousand deaths on a population of about six thousand inhabitants and all or some of the main monuments of the city were destroyed. Yet, on that occasion, the city reacted with much vigor reconstructing the buildings, in particular the churches, in the Baroque style that had already timidly appeared at the end of the previous century in the vaults of the Cathedral of s. Panfilo. The 1706 earthquake had obviously struck a city that was evidently stronger under the economic aspect, which was able to start over with an overall transformation of the architectural aspect of its inhabited area. On the contrary, the 2009 earthquake struck an urban system that was heavily in crisis and ended up slowing down the social and economic mechanism. At the beginning of the seventies the Industrial Development Zone (N.S.I.) area was created to house the factories in the broader industrialization design of southern Italy, the so-called "Mezzogiorno". A flat area and rich in water, the "Pianoro della Maddalena" was thus taken away from agriculture and destined for industries that were built using the benefits of the law that put at their disposal the "Cassa (then Agenzia) per il Mezzogiorno", a State institution created to make the

industrialization of southern Italy possible. This process worked well for more than ten years but when the legal benefits ended the factories gradually began to close and move elsewhere, a bit like Agatha Christie's Ten Little Niggers, so much so that by the time of the earthquake only one factory remained in operation. It is clear that this situation has had devastating effects on agriculture, above all because none of the establishments settled in the N.S.I. area of Sulmona envisaged the transformation of local agricultural products. So, while agriculture has been deprived of one of its high-quality areas, today the situation sees a sequence of abandoned warehouses that make what was to be the scene of an industrial conversion look like an "elephant cemetery". At present an agricultural "reconversion" of a territory made functional to the exclusive presence of industrial processing plants is not conceivable. Recently, the Municipal Administration has begun an intervention to recover the abandoned warehouses by attempting to modify the urban planning rules that regulate the P.E.E.P. area to transform the former factories into commercial centers. This initiative has provoked a very violent controversy by the traders of the city and of the Historic Centre in particular, already in difficulty due to the presence of the shopping centres and therefore, according to them, definitively crushed by the possible commercial conversion of these warehouses. The general impression that one has of the trade situation in Sulmona is that of an out-of-control mechanism which suffers from a crisis of demand determined by the overall impoverishment of spending and a consequent crisis in supply suspended between retail in agony, large hypertrophic distribution and above all e-commerce. Control should come from the general and detailed urban planning tools, such as the "Commercial Plan" that should regulate the quantity of sales areas of shops and large centres; a plan that is usually lacking or distorted from time to time by modifying the "quota rules" following the proposal of the establishment of new shopping

centers that guarantee the creation of new jobs. However, even the formation of specific plans, such as the “Commercial Plan” are nullified by the lack of a new and efficient general planning instrument, which is still linked to the General Town Plan (PRG) drawn up in 1978 by “Tecnici Emiliani Associati” (TEA). The current instrument is in fact the variant written by engineer Giovanni Crocioni and architect Roberto D’Agostino, by now anachronistic with respect to the local reality and current urban planning trends. In December 2018 the engineer Crocioni illustrated the guidelines of the new Plan which he himself was in charge of. As declared, it is a modern and innovative Plan, based on the technique of “urban equalisation” which provides for forms of “compensation” and “reward”. In particular, the objective is to avoid penalizing private property and to encourage the recovery of existing assets. Other specific objectives of the Plan are seismic prevention and the creation of collective equipment for public interest. Despite the brilliant premises, it is verified how the Municipality of Sulmona itself suffers from the lack of managers and officials, transferred or retired, despite the fact that the same designer had requested administrative continuity with the previous urban planning phase. The Municipality has therefore taken steps to find a temporary manager, publishing a call for applications even if the need has been known for a long time, as evidenced by the difficulties in which the administrative machine, that regulates the life of the city, operates.

4. Some Proposals

The urban planning tool should regulate the development and management of a territory divided into four different areas. The ancient centre, the new area east of the Vella river, the suburbs, the hamlets. This articulation is easily distinguishable from above, by the rarefaction of the building fabric from the center to the suburb. The ancient core of Sulmona has historically developed on a plateau where the town

was restructured in Roman times by Silla after the civil war against Mario, supported by Sulmona (I century B.C.). The Roman city of which Ovid writes (“Gelidis uberrimus undis”, “rich in icy waters”) is visible through the quadrangular structure that remained so until the Middle Ages. The modification of this morphology occurred between the end of the thirteenth and the fourteenth century with the development southwards and then northwards to incorporate new quarters that were created around emerging works of architecture, such as the churches of s. Maria della Tomba, s. Chiara, and the Cathedral of s. Panfilo. In this way the city, surrounded by walls in which monumental gates opened, assumed the characteristic elongated “spindle” shape determined by the presence of the two rivers Vella (to the east) and Gizio (to the west). This morphology remained unchanged until the end of the Second World War, when public housing settlements determined the exploitation of the plain east of the Vella river, which however was held back by the presence of the valley of the river itself, crossed by two small bridges: Iapasseri and s. Liberata. It was in the Sixties, with the construction of the great structure of the Morandi bridge, that the development eastwards of the city received a decisive boost, so much so that on the margins of the first modern settlement the 1978 PRG identified the PEEP area, thus determining a sort of growth of the Historic Centre with a new city rich in residential buildings but lacking in services and identity. It is worth noting that the bridge designed by Riccardo Morandi for Sulmona was also put in discussion following the collapse of the Polcevera Viaduct in Genoa in August 2018, designed by the same engineer. In Italy, since that time all the bridges designed by Riccardo Morandi have been viewed with mixed distrust and fear, a bit like masonry (and not reinforced concrete) constructions after the 2009 earthquake. In Sulmona, awaiting checks, even if the two bridges are completely different from one another in terms of structure, it was decided to prohibit the

parking of cars on the bridge on both sides, after parking was allowed on one side after the 2009 earthquake. As we can see, the city suffers from many problems that also involve the emotional sphere, which is very important in a country like Italy. Rationally, what appears necessary and universally acceptable, is an operation of securing, recovering and enhancing the historical and monumental heritage of the ancient center, which presents acceptable conditions despite the fact that survival has been entrusted only to the great abilities of architects, artists and builders of the past. A Roman city lies largely intact less than two meters below the current street pavement, as shown by the in situ museum created by the writer together with Dr. Rosanna Tuteri of the Archaeological Superintendence for Abruzzo in the years 1991-1993. A rediscovery and enhancement of this extraordinary heritage remains the absolute priority for the future development of the city, with regard to churches, palaces, archaeological remains, and “ordinary” buildings which also constitute an extraordinary examples in the highest Italian tradition. However, it should be noted that, despite the programmes, the current Municipal Administration has not always given the necessary attention to architectural interventions carried out within the

Historic Center, as evidenced by the creation of a public space near Piazza del Carmine, which has distorted the characteristics of the pre-existing area. Ultimately, the preservation of the ancient nucleus should not be realized looking exclusively at its inside, but also its outside, with the prospect of forming a “city territory” capable of involving all the ancient centers of the neighboring centers of the Peligna Valley in a single “urban history system”. In this sense, architectural and artistic excellences could be merged with gastronomic products such as sugared almonds and red garlic in a single “Ovid Brand” capable of guaranteeing the quality and uniqueness of the offer of a territory whose resilience is documented by centuries of difficulty and extraordinary creations in the cultural and artistic fields. It is hardly necessary to note how in Sulmona two commercial establishments in the Old Town, the very central bar in Piazza XX Settembre and a restaurant in Via Ercole Ciofano, acquired some time ago by Chinese companies, were bought back by local entrepreneurs: a very rare case in the general Italian and international scenario. This is within an urban context that suffers instead of a general depopulation and structural degradation process (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Aerial view of the historical centre of Sulmona (photo by Abruzzo Rotori Sulmona).

5. Conclusion

The city's various, successive administrations have tried to revert the crisis in the historic centre with a series of measures such as pedestrianisation and joint trading strategies with business owners. However they haven't studied the structural causes of this depopulation which has taken the form of a turn-over of the traditional local residents with citizens from outside EU. In particular, the commercial situation has significantly worsened in the southern section of Corso Ovidio, which is the mainstay of city trade. The

situation is so poor that tourists, arriving today via Porta Napoli, are presented with a sequence of abandoned shop fronts. Not only are they exposed to the neglect of time but also to the dangerous hygienic consequences of this abandonment.

It is from these fundamentals that the need for this study has arisen, and is outlined as an indispensable scientific tool with which to implement a strategy of consolidation and revitalisation within the ancient centre of the city of Ovid [1] (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 Aerial view of the historical centre of Sulmona: in the foreground the "Palazzo della ss. Annunziata" (photo by Abruzzo Rotori Sulmona).



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