A New Way to the Knowledge of Historic Sites: The Albergo Diffuso Model

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Abstract

The Albergo Diffuso (dispersed hotel) is a model for local tourism development that allows guests to experience an historic, usually urban, setting. Accommodation is provided in houses and rooms located a short distance away from the core of the hotel itself, the building in which reception, the bar/restaurant area, and the common spaces and services are located.

The increasing spread of this model is mainly due to the responsiveness of part of the tourism market to ideas of sustainability and environmental friendliness. The model is compatible with the goal of enabling the continuation of economic development, which has not always been respectful of environmental values. It is believed that the very nature of this type of accommodation, thinking in terms of a large and flexible version of the model, may be particularly suitable for a local development plan. It can reduce the environmental impact in settings that have been already adversely affected by previous economic growth strategies that have turned out to be disrespectful of their surroundings.

1. Introduction

The necessary condition of this article is based on the observation that cultural tourism [1] [2], which has spread since the 1970s, has changed considerably and particularly during the last twenty years. The tourism demand is differentiated by and noted for a requirement for authenticity and more and more engaging and preferably unique and valuable experiences [3], able to intimately connect the tourist with the cultural heritage of the genius loci and the tradition connected with it [4].

In addition, these changes largely arise out of cultural concepts, and out of territory in terms of its landscape and environment, which according to the meaning of “cultural landscape” is moreover recognised as a visible witness to its history.

The re-found drive for conservation and territorial revitalisation, enhancement, and development has had the direct consequence of the creation and development of alternative solutions, including hospitality, which are increasingly sensitive to sustainability. Consequently, as a cross-themed multi-subject phenomenon, tourism plays a crucial role in the sustainable development of the territory [5] which “must meet all current requirements of tourists and host regions while at the same time protecting, developing, enhancing, and revitalising opportunities for the future” [6].

The definition and development of new innovative and sustainable models of hospitality [7] must therefore protect and safeguard the natural and landscape resources from the uncontrolled development of tourism structures and infrastructure, and reduce their impact in contexts already compromised by previous economic growth strategies which had little respect for the context. The most compromised situations are radically transformed and saturated contexts in which the transformations have frequently changed the structuring characteristics of the landscape and often made it impossible to prevent the homogenisation and

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banalisation of the traces of tradition and memory. They need to be redeveloped using architectural/landscape projects founded on recognition of “figures of meaning” and respect for the particular or unique characteristics of the place.

At the same time, some reflection on the need to find planning solutions is necessary for the proposal of a new model of tourism development as an alternative to new high-density tourist settlements in contexts where above all they would impact strongly on the surrounding landscape.

In the context of this fermenting transformation and innovation that forces the definition of new models of reception and accommodation, the typology of the Albergo Diffuso is of relatively recent inception and seems to answer the demand to develop, enhance, and revitalise the territory, contributing to the preservation of social, economic, and environmental balance by involving the entire community and restoring the existing architectural heritage. This truly Italian model of the Albergo Diffuso, which translates into English as extended, dispersed or scattered hotel, can be adapted and replicated in other places with the same quality and the same valuable historic-cultural merits capable of transforming it into a motor of initiative and activity if not, hopefully, into a generator of economic resources, respecting the important historic, natural, and landscape assets without merely being an exercise in nostalgia about the past. There are Albergo Diffuso developments in various European contexts (Spain, Portugal, Croatia, Switzerland) some of which are presented in this paper as type cases together with some Italian examples.

2. The Albergo Diffuso: Between innovation and tradition

The idea and name of Albergo Diffuso arose at the end of the 1970s in order to revitalise and develop historic town and village centres as well as hamlets affected by the earthquake in the Friuli region of north-eastern Italy. The idea slowly spread through the 1980s and various attempts at bringing it to fruition were made but this model did not find concrete activation until the 1990s and it was only in 1998 that it was regulated for the first time by a Regional Law passed by the Autonomous Region of Sardinia.

Founded on revitalising small communities, on the rediscovery of local identity, and on the offer of an authentic tourist experience [8], this reception typology relates to the wider situation of identifying models and strategies to restore minor historic town and village centres and small hamlets that are inserted in the main “development circuits” in this guise. At the same time the character of “sleepy territories” is emphasised, in which the sleepiness is a distinct factor in this development which is not centred on the concept of growth [9]. The “ruins” and “remains” in the territory, which have often been abandoned and left to their fate as their specific economic function declined, have in this way their history and value restored in order to develop and revitalise the existing historic-architectural assets in the name of containing consumption of land and reusing built surface area in addition to preserving the history and identity of the place.

The Albergo Diffuso is configured as a “horizontal” structure which means that it is not articulated vertically in one large individual building constructed ex novo, very often indifferent to relationships with the context from both the point of view of localisation and of composition of the buildings. In contrast, the horizontal Albergo Diffuso is contained in pre-existing individual housing units and architectural emergences diffused throughout the territory. This means it can be integrated into the territory using differentiated and flexible methods [10]. Some solutions provide for the hotel to be articulated inside a historic hamlet sometimes occupying a large part of the same with the passage of time, while others are located in the historic centre of a small or medium-sized art heritage city, and yet others are articulated in particularly valued rural or mountain areas [11], [12].

So the Albergo Diffuso is configured as a flexible structure whose variations all present an identical dominator, that is, more housing units become involved, easily recognised by their historic, cultural, and architectural identity, restored for tourism and equipped with innovative technologies albeit conform to “minimum intervention” [13].

A characteristic shared by all of the solutions is that the bedrooms and related services are located within the pre-existing housing units and not more than 200/300 metres from the building that contains the communal areas and the service activities (reception, dining room, refreshments). In some cases new buildings have to be planned in order to guarantee the functioning of the new use of the nucleus so that, for example, they meet the regulations requiring that they are both compatible with the context and with the typological characteristics of the existing buildings.

3. Case studies

The research involved three very interesting particularly significant cases of this reception type because the first two cases concern historic villages in Italy and are strongly oriented to the principles of sustainability and maintenance of the established relationship between built environment and territory while the third forms part of a wider project of landscape redevelopment in a territory south of the city of Porto in Portugal.
3.1. Santo Stefano di Sessanio (L’Aquila, Abruzzo)

Santo Stefano di Sessanio is a fortified medieval village inside the Gran Sasso e dei Monti della Laga National Park located on top of a hill 1,251 metres above sea level (Figure 1). The urban configuration of the settlement presents the typical topographical form of villages in central Italy and has remained unchanged. The village today is the fruit of spontaneous urban development, avoiding the planning laws, evident in its historic stratification (Figure 2). Since 1900, there has been a gradual but constant abandonment of the village due to crisis in mountain agriculture and migration from small to large urban centres for better employment opportunities but which has paradoxically maintained the integrity of the heritage in the natural landscape (Figures 3, 4) [14].

Restoration and redirection to reception was inspired by the recognition of a historic heritage with very marked identifying features which has been revitalised by adopting a rigorous preservation approach, respecting the places and traces of life present in the stratification of the built environment created by the peasant tradition in the Abruzzi region (Figure 5). This is a not a rhetorical approach nor is it demeaned by musealisation, and any kind of unlikely exhibitionism has also been rejected. Instead, it re-proposes a kind of reconstruction that is not disconnected from the actual situation found in the place - for example, keeping the original domestic organisation – so as to capture the deepest of meanings communicated by these places (Figure 6).
From the point of view of organisation in the hotel, configured horizontally, there are 42 rooms, 8 engaging convivial spaces, a restaurant, an events hall, and a relaxation centre. Alongside these are a series of various initiatives and activities (craft shops, agricultural holdings connected to the restaurant, etc.) not only emphasising how the project involves the restoration of the architectural heritage but also contributes to increasing commercial activity and services in the territory.

3.2. Prata Sannita Inferiore (Caserta, Campania)

Prata Sannita is a small hilly village 333 metres above sea level in the valley of the Volturno River just inside the Province of Caserta, in the Region of Campania near the border with the Region of the Molise in central Italy. The municipal territory presents two residential areas of different origins. Firstly, the medieval Prata Inferiore
(Lower Prata) is a fortified village with an imposing castle, and the more recent Prata Superiore (Upper Prata) is built on a plateau which dominates the plain (Figures 7, 8). The fact that the territory of Prata Sannita is divided in two parts has led to the idea of a project connecting these two places, that is, the small medieval village and the new Prata. The old village of Prata Sannita is conceived from this point of view as an extended hotel called the Million Donkey Hotel, where not only the abandoned spaces have been transformed into rooms that have a history (or more than one history) but are also interconnected. At the same time, Prata Sannita is perceived to be a unique field of action composed of environments and pathways that have been transformed into objects of historic memory. The aim of the transformation is to expand the public space for which the “rooms” are not only used for visitors to stay but also become surreal places ready to receive personal or collective contributions from the inhabitants [15].

The Million Donkey Hotel project was enabled by the participation of three groups: the inhabitants of Prata Sannita, the Feld72 architekten Design Studio with the participants in the specific workshop, and the tourist groups and interested individuals from the places involved. They uncovered new spaces in the abandoned architecture of the small medieval village during the workshop and have brought them back to life by making them the first three “hotel rooms”, that can also be used “out-of-season” by the inhabitants of the village as extensions of the public space (Figures 9, 10).
It is more than a restoration project. In the words of a Feld72 architekten planner, it is an experiment involving “this pretence of a hotel and its special histories. What is also certainly important is the theme of the tourist knowledgeable about the places and the strategies to counteract the consumer’s perception of the villages and landscape. The places transformed are not just part of a culture of sightseeing, we also want to see them used”.

3.3. Vila de Pereira do Campo (Parque Patrimonial do Mondego, Portugal)

The typology of Albergo Diffuso in this specific case forms part of a wider restoration, enhancement, and revitalisation transformation of the territory by a region-wide project (“Territorial Project of the Mondego Heritage Park”) whose central cultural, geographical, and architectural axis is condensed along the River Mondego (Figure 11).

Interest in this project started with the above-mentioned concept of cultural landscape and is based on the idea of the river as a cultural and geographical matrix synthesising the identity of the territory through which it runs. At 234 km long, the River Mondego is the longest river in Portugal and makes its way east to west through the central region of Portugal connecting the mountains with areas bordering the coast, flowing into the sea near Figueira da Foz.

In particular, the architectural heritage in the strip of land through which the river runs is mainly composed of small rural villages and hamlets of cultural, environmental, and historic value and this heritage has become a necessary condition for exploiting the motor of local development by activating socio-economic regeneration of forgotten territory including by strengthening of the tourist offer.

The theme of Albergo Diffuso is applied in the small historic hamlet of Pereira do Campo which lies on a slope above the River Mondego and is situated in the commune of Montemor-o-Velho but is functionally connected to the city of Coimbra (Figures 12, 13).

Although the tourist nucleus extends beyond the old hamlet, the management and services are concentrated inside one building which has been restored with full respect being given to its original identity. The restoration concentrated on maintaining and revitalising the historic–environmental, typological, and architectural characteristics of the building and using traditional materials and technologies (Figure 14).
The hotel includes 10 housing units providing a total number of 50 rooms to which a series of services to complete the reception offer have been added with the passage of time.

So Pereira do Campo has become the first example of an *Albergo Diffuso* in the “Territorial Project of the Mondego Heritage Park” that will also be re-proposed subsequently in other rural centres along the river and integrated into a system of natural routes, culture, and education. They will then be configured as episodes in a story that unravels through the territory and this will be the starting point for the uninterrupted rediscovery of the “landscape museum”.

Figure 12. Vila de Pereira do Campo: View of the church

Figure 13. Vila de Pereira do Campo: A house of the village

Figure 14. Vila de Pereira do Campo: The planning and the design of the *Albergo Diffuso* site
4. Final Considerations

The Albergo Diffuso system enhances the landscape and is compatible with tourism development that is perhaps less immediate but offers long-term guarantees. In this way, environmental resources are in fact preserved both actively and passively: on the one hand, it injects new life into the small towns and, on the other, avoids the construction of hotel complexes that disfigure landscapes of natural beauty. In this regard, it is worth recalling the short novel by Italian writer Italo Calvino which was published for the first time in 1957 under the title La speculazione edilizia (‘A Plunge in Real Estate’) concerning Liguria, the Italian coastal region that suffered the most damage following the war because of rapid and unregulated construction [16]. Set in the Italian Riviera, it describes the garish building changes that also overwhelmed the smaller coastal towns and to which Lombard holiday makers would go during their summer holidays, only to leave these structures empty for the remainder of the year. Yet, the advent of the culture of tourism had no impact on many mountain villages and towns.

If responsible tourism enhances the area and its uniqueness, protects the environment and supports traditional products, it is natural to think of the subsequent advantage of sharing knowledge and experience among local communities. It is also about the potential of gaining access to tourism buyers and the industry press.

At the same time, cooperation is an effective way to involve different players in a multi-sectoral perspective that facilitates integrated approaches to those that are specific ideals characterising the field of cultural, rural and in general “alternative” tourism. In fact, different players build partnerships which involve various sector-specific, legal and geographic entities. This is therefore an important resource that local communities can carefully evaluate for developing tourism potential.

References


