

REGENERATION OF DISUSED INDUSTRIAL SITES
THROUGH CREATIVITY IN EUROPE

RESOLVE

RESCUE — Regeneration of disused industrial sites
through creativity in Europe

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REGENERATING FROM ABANDONMENT. THE JURIST'S PERSPECTIVE

Michela Passalacqua

ABANDONMENT, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRACY

In everyday language, an abandoned good is an unused good. However, an unused good does not necessarily have to be a “discarded” good.

For chattels, the distinction between good, residue and discard is “apparently” simple. A good is something that you want to use, a discard is something that the owner or holder intends to get rid of because it is useless. Instead, a residue is a leftover from a production or consumption process that the owner or holder intends to reuse, because its use or even its exchange has a value.

When talking about real estate, such as a disused industrial site, the question becomes more complicated. First of all, the owner may not use an asset in order to preserve it, without thereby wanting to get rid of it; furthermore, in Italian law, non-use is part of property enjoyment rights, therefore, it does not disentitle the owner.

In truth, the distinction between a discarded piece of land — waste land — and unused land is very significant. The point is whether the uncontaminated (or maybe decontaminated) but abandoned land of a disused industrial site can be considered a residue, that is, a leftover from a production process. In conceptual terms, a disused industrial site can be likened to a residue if it can be reused, becoming a so-called by-product. Hence, it is important to ask what public reuse of lands reclaimed from economic cycles should aim towards and who should “lead” it.

Reuse can consist of the simple reappropriation of places, in the sense of being able to enter them, explore them, including their history and their pain, and leave them as they are so as not to violate them a second time. The way to “save not just the stones, but also their soul” (Severini) lies in democracy as represented by the local governance of municipalities, provinces, regions and metropolitan cities.

In order to honour the stones’ memory, it is not enough to rely on single people and ensure that everyone can access a place safely. Public intervention instead seems indispensable to reinvent these places while at the same time preserving a trace of the past.

It is obvious that regional governance does not just protect town planning interests, but other interests too, such as health, economic development, the identity of places and social development while preventing the spread of

degraded areas. It is also obvious that the revival of a place must not be artificial, “throw away”, transitory. A temporary but sustainable use is different. Think of abandoned areas used temporarily for cultural ends.

Besides, the public institutions must exercise the functions allocated to them by the Constitution, they are not discretionary. Hence, they cannot shirk from governing the region. Furthermore, profit and wealth are no longer the only things that count in the concept of development. Instead, the relational paradigm underlines the importance of providing the tools to fully assert the centrality of the person, the whole person and his/her needs. The Stiglitz, Sen and Froussi commission report sets out a multifaceted definition of well-being which necessarily concerns present and future environmental conditions, social integration and relations, and personal activities including work. Among the 12 recommendations, the sixth concentrates on the objective conditions, such as health and education, which need working on in order to improve people’s quality of life. We have to start with everyday activities, including the entitlement to a decent job and accommodation, and the social and natural environment we live in. The factors determining personal and economic security have to be worked on too. Not only that, according to recommendation number eight, when planning policies in specific sectors, we should account for the ties between the various spheres of every person’s quality of life. In short, if well-being is multifaceted, maybe we should not tire ourselves out by trying to reinvent the calculation of the GDP but instead, and more simply, give public policies different facets too. Therefore, we should collect information concerning the different facets and adjust our sights to focus on the potential impact on the various aspects of quality of life.

REGENERATION IS NECESSARY

For all of the above reasons, regeneration is one of the imperative duties of economic and social solidarity. Its fulfilment is overseen by the Republic as set out in article 2 of the Italian Constitution. Regeneration is a matter of inclusion, memory and public/community efforts (Gregotti, 1962).

It concerns inclusion because the regeneration of abandoned and/or degraded areas in the city is of general public interest. Without regeneration, these abandoned lands are apt to become places of social segregation and degradation, environmental pollution and discrimination. Hence, we cannot shy away from regenerating disused sites. First of all, their regeneration can spark the desired transition towards circularity; second, it can limit the negative impacts of the reduction or even loss of some rights of the residents in some urbanized areas.

It concerns memory because regeneration allows the community, but also the single people making it up, to regain possession of places, the informal contacts that often linger there, and the sense of continuity. Some have proposed an essentialist notion of place (Cologni, 2012) and, while also referring to the contribution of environmental psychology, see identity and place as a network of loose and unstable rather than fixed relations.

In short, a place cannot be left unused inside a town or city because our identity depends on the way in which we relate to places. That is to say, abandonment goes against the full expression of the identity of the people who live in those places.

The efforts of the community work so long as the aim is not to restore what was but instead to bring out the diverse reactions of adjustment to the traumatic event. Regeneration is reinvention. Structured around renewal, it returns to the roots and thus produces knowledge.

Many recent legislative texts invite communities to be resilient in order to deal with natural or catastrophic emergencies. They mainly request cultural adaptation to the new scenarios in order to limit the damage and make sure that things keep working, although to a lesser extent. Regeneration is resilience. It is the manifestation of resistance. However, it has to be clear that it is a cognitive process to increase knowledge of the place. It has to create inclusion by finding a sum between opposites.

Therefore, regeneration does not just mean bringing a degraded area back into use. A reuse needs to be found that does not trigger the same dynamics that led to its former economic and social demise. In order for this to happen, the community with a general interest in the site must be involved. They must be consulted in order to propose options that lead to their satisfaction.

Through their involvement in designing the regeneration, the community acquires a new sense of belonging to those places and takes part in creating their new memory.



The Junist's Perspective, Rescue European Week, Area ex Cenamica Vaccari, 2021

WHAT IT MEANS TO RE-GENERATE

The definition of regeneration is experimental, in the sense that the regulations are in a phase of evolution, in the hands of active regional legislators while the state legislator languishes in debate in the Chamber and Senate.

In the regional legislation and the various bills and draft laws, the notion of regeneration is described as a financial town planning operation that also makes an impact on the social and economic dimension (very different from the London Docklands regeneration process in the 1980s encouraged by Thatcher's liberal policy to maximize economic development by fully exploiting the available resources).

For me, the notion that the essential core of regeneration is to make the object into something different, to give it new "basic and distinctive characteristics" (Bianchi 2020), is not convincing. For example, an intervention on a disused production site to transform it into a management-cultural-tourist centre does not necessarily go in the direction of "regeneration". Indeed, it is easy to imagine an unsustainable consumption of resources, either because of the centre's impact on the landscape, or because of its inappropriate land use, which will then lead to a new abandonment.

Regeneration is transformation. But can it only happen through programmed public intervention? Or can it be informal too?

It is a question of choices. It is impossible to regenerate everything formally, because neither the local institutions nor the European Union, probably, have the financial strength. Some basic choices need to be made. However, this is difficult without a complete state census of which formal interventions can be carried out by the public institutions, so as to prevent exclusions which lead to intolerable inequalities. At that point, widespread and varied informal interventions could be made, in my opinion, with all the features to be called regeneration.

The bottom-line political choices must, however, be clear and take into account citizen participation. Informal interventions, on the other hand, so long as they do not run into obstacles, can go their own way, perhaps even receiving indirect institutional support.

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