

Governance of farming land in urban transformations

Report on rural vernacular heritage research

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The growing trend towards urbanisation is over passing every prediction. Since the beginning of 2009, already more than 50 percent of the 8 billion of the world inhabitants live in urban areas.

Farmland consumption is an emergency in many European countries and worldwide. As an example 10 hectares of farmland are erased every day in Lombardy (Northern Italy).

During this globalisation period, the agricultural areas left under pressure of new intensive urbanization services, become frail. The loss of cultural landscape and environmental quality is just one of the results. Erasing farmland means deleting bio-cultural heritage and identity of life communities linked with agriculture.

Stopping this heritage consumption trend and *finding sustainable ways of preserving and conserving farming resources, is a common challenge* for many countries in the world

This is the theme of the “rural vernacular heritage research”, co-ordinated by University of Milan. 24 academics affiliated in Forum UNESCO - University and Heritage (FUUH), from 4 continents are already working on it.

The aim is to define how the loss of farmlands affects the sense of place as well as future environmental assets.

Agriculture is made of links between land, farm, buildings, environment, biodiversity and production of each country in the world. In the tradition, *it is influenced by local geographical conditions, such as:*

- *climate*
- *soil quality*
- *existing resources (e.g. water)*
- *availability of building materials*
- *local knowledge of building techniques*
- *socio-economic system*
- *availability of infrastructures on the land.*

Because of the relationships between each of these features and agriculture every *region, however small, has its own local production, recognizable type of farm and its farming landscape.*

“Rural vernacular” heritage synthesizes these multi-effects of agriculture on the sense of place.

Upon a preliminary study developed between universities from Italy, Chile, Argentina and India, the research methodology was oriented to read the significance of rural vernacular heritage providing some criteria on how to distinguish terms of potential cultural values resulting from the meeting between agricultural production and site.

For attesting the presence of rural vernacular heritage, from the methodological point of view, the research is articulated according to:

- **model of farming**
- **farming** landscapes in the farming evolution
- **settlement** models requested by agricultural systems
- **building** features (materials and techniques)
- **urban** forms of small rural settlements
- **geographic** (topography, altitude, climate and resources drive to a way of farming activities and production)
- **ethnological** (different types of population who have different beliefs, social values and aspirations, consequently it is necessary to add these indicators as well in the identification and features of sample area population)
- **historic** (links between governance, agricultural work and social life style).
- **protected areas** (legislation affecting the remaining models or "rurality")

“Cascina Campazzo” is a farmstead located in the area of Milan, in Northern Italy. It is one of the key case studies analysed to understand how to identify and manage rural vernacular heritage once inserted in the highly dynamical characters of metropolitan areas.

This farm is in a green area of 880.000 square metres of farmland, in the rural fringes, where the urban meets the agricultural territory and rural culture. It is 3 kilometres from the centre of town. With 150 milking cows and many services for citizens, it represents an important sample of modern agriculture which is capable to maintain rural vernacular relationships in an urban sprawl. Here farmers are tenants since the 60s. The landowner of the green area is the Council of Milan. Today the private landowner of this farmstead wishes to replace it with new urban dwellings, following the drive for modernization triggered by the forthcoming venue of “Expo 2015”.

Cascina Campazzo is one of 57 rural settlements engulfed in the urban sprawl of Milan which is fighting to survive. It is the last one with such an important value for the understanding of local current way of life. It is essential to reflect on the impact of the transformation on the city’s identity and on the community’s ways of life. As such it is an important cultural heritage which is noiselessly disappearing.

Rural vernacular heritage can play a decisive role in protecting communities’ identity and saving farms and farmland from the daily soil consumption.

Making people, institutions and stakeholders aware of the agro-cultural values of their own places, shows how agriculture can still improve the quality of life in different contexts.

Without farmers there will be not any rural vernacular heritage.

We leave this issue of cultural heritage, identity, biodiversity, food safety for your reflection and encourage readers of this article who would be interested in the topic of rural vernacular heritage to join our international research team.