



RE-INHABITATION STRATEGIES FOR LEFT-BEHIND PLACES ***Policies, practices and trajectories of territorial regeneration***

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Contemporary analyses of territorial marginality and fragility highlight a profound polarisation between attractive (albeit increasingly inaccessible) urban centres and inner and mountain areas experiencing demographic and economic decline. This gap drives the debate on *left-behind places* (Pike et al., 2023; Fiorentino, 2024; Rauhut et al., 2026), conceptualised as a spatial imaginary where territories affected by various marginalisation phenomena converge. Fuelling this fracture is the hegemonic narrative of *metrophilia* (Morgan, 2014; 2018), which celebrates cities as the sole engines of productive, political, and cultural development, relegating non-urban territories to a structurally subordinate and peripheral role.

Socioeconomically, the affirmation of this paradigm translates into a progressive thinning out of services and a weakening of the labour supply in the so-called *places that don't matter*. The direct consequence is a growing “disenchantment” with institutions, perceived as responsible for the consolidation of territorial inequalities. This disillusionment has been intercepted by neo-populist political forces, capable of redrawing, at the electoral level, the new “geographies of discontent” (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

In recent years, however, there has been a reversal of this trend, defined as a shift in the centre of gravity from the urban to the territorial (Lupatelli, in Lupatelli & De Rossi, 2025). This approach critically challenges the *metrophilic* vision to counter geographical disparities. The renewed sensitivity toward the margins emerges clearly today in the scientific and cultural debate, partly as a direct legacy of the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI in its Italian acronym), which was nevertheless followed by a phase of fragmentation and stagnation in political action.

Yet, at the national and local levels, an extemporaneous logic still prevails, offering contingent responses to problems that are instead structural. Interventions such as 1€ Houses (*Case a 1€*), Green Communities, or the Villages Call for Proposals (*Bando Borghi, Next Generation EU*) prove useful in the short term but insufficient in the long run. Indeed, there is a lack of an institutional framework capable of recognising and safeguarding integrated regenerative actions (De Rossi and Mascino, in Lupatelli & De Rossi, 2025) that can act simultaneously on the economic, social, environmental, and cultural dimensions of these territories. In this perspective, local communities - where present, or through processes of social re-weaving where they are now weak - become the primary and indispensable transformative subject. Territorial regeneration ceases to be a mere overcoming of the tensions between ideal and project, becoming a far-sighted political and cultural move. It is a collective process guided by a precise intention to inhabit territories in a new way, capable of transforming contexts through new practices of territorial care and coexistence with the environment.

However, the “unbearable lightness of policies” (Colavitti et al., 2024) is often masked by effective media narratives, such as the sale of houses at a symbolic price (Delon & Graziano, 2023; Colavitti et al., 2024) or the rhetoric of the indiscriminate attraction of digital nomads (Corazza et al., 2024). Despite weak institutional responses, however, experimentations are emerging that can outline new socio-economic geographies. Inner, rural, and mountain areas are thus transforming into true laboratories of regenerative innovation (Castaldi et al., 2026).

Several studies (Riabitare l'Italia, 2022; UNCEM, 2025) have already investigated the characteristics and motivations behind these practices. It remains to be established, however, whether this plurality of experiences constitutes a real phenomenon of neo-population (*neopopolamento* in Italian) (Manifesto of Camaldoli, 2019). The open question is whether this trend can translate into development strategies capable of structurally reformulating the relationship between metropolises, medium-sized cities, and small towns, bringing forth a precise and solid political and cultural endeavour.

The objective of this *Special Issue* is to bring together the accounts of these experimentations to attempt a conceptual recomposition of territorial regeneration. While acknowledging it as a multidimensional quasi-concept (Barbera, in Lupatelli & De Rossi, 2025), the intent is to prevent its fluidity from turning into theoretical vagueness (Lanzani, 2024). We therefore invite reflections on a situated and contemporary definition of dwelling in inner and mountain areas. Concurrently, it is necessary to investigate which political, social, and infrastructural conditions can stimulate and safeguard the regenerative heritage potential and neo-population flows. Finally, it is crucial to understand its spatial and urban-territorial implications to concretely guarantee the habitability of these territories.

Theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions may explore territorial regeneration experimentations through transdisciplinary lenses, preferably organised along the following axes:

1. New forms of community dwelling and typological-spatial innovation

Analysis of housing experiments capable of overcoming traditional residential models, recovering the relational value of dwelling as care and sharing. Contributions on co-living, rural social

housing, the reuse of abandoned or underutilised heritage, and the design of hybrid spaces where the residential function intertwines with work, culture, and community welfare will be of particular interest.

2. Tangible and intangible infrastructure of habitability

Reflections on how essential services (such as health, education, mobility) and digital and physical infrastructures redefine living conditions in the territories. This axis includes the study of the spatial impact of micro-infrastructure interventions, flexible proximity services, and the role that spatial design plays in enabling or hindering the daily practices of neo-population.

3. New inhabitants: demographics and rooting practices

Contributions investigating the plurality of subjects driving the trend reversal (returning youth, migrants, territorial entrepreneurs, multi-local inhabitants). Moving beyond the rhetoric of transient digital nomadism, this axis focuses on long-term rooting practices, new endogenous economies, and the cultural frictions or interactions that shape these new hybrid communities.

4. Local governance, commoning practices, cooperative economies, and tools beyond extemporaneity

Reflections on forms of institutional innovation, including community cooperatives, shared administration, collaboration pacts, and experience-led local development strategies. The aim is to investigate how these practices manage to integrate ordinary resources by overcoming the logic of competitive calls and extraordinary funding, from a perspective of multilevel governance and socio-metabolic regeneration across territories, bridging the urban and the agroforestry domains.

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