

# **Revitalizing the Past: Exploring the extent of the Social Sustainability of Adaptive Reuse of Cultural Heritage Buildings in Italian Rural Villages. The Case of Airbnb**

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## Abstract

There is growing acceptance that historical heritage buildings are part of a place's social and cultural capital, and that their preservation provides fundamental economic, environmental and social benefits. This research focuses on the investigation of the degree of the latter in a specific cultural landscape: it aims to respond to the question: 'To what extent is the adaptive reuse of cultural heritage buildings in Italian rural villages socially sustainable?' The question is tackled empirically through the investigation of the case study of Airbnb and its "Italian villages" program, for which Airbnb partnered with the local municipalities of Italian rural villages to turn abandoned historical buildings of symbolic significance for the communities into alluring Airbnbs. The repurposing projects studied are four: Casa Greco in Civita di Bagnoregio (Lazio), Casa Panitteri in Sambuca di Sicilia (Sicily), Casa Maer in Lavenone (Lombardy), and Casa Cuoco in Civita Campomarano (Molise). As it has a humanistic focus, the research method is qualitative in order to better interpret the individual experiences and perceptions in the complexity of their contexts. The data is collected through semi-structured interviews conducted over a span of three months with an heterogeneous sample of stakeholders, which includes individuals who were directly involved and/or affected by the adaptive reuse projects. The data gathered is analyzed through thematic analysis to support the identification of recurring themes. The study reveals that the degree of social sustainability of adaptive reuse projects depends on the presence of supporting factors which, if present, can enhance the relevance of the initiative for the local community. The paramount condition which enables the occurrence of social sustainability is the collaborative rationality of the stakeholders involved in the project. The lack of communication and cooperation of these hinders the success of the repurposing initiative, obstructing the generation of social benefits for the community. An active local government capable of implementing initiatives connected to the

project and engaging the inhabitants of the village magnifies conversely the sense of pride and cohesion perceived by them. The dynamic resulting from this can propel a process of urban regeneration within the area, contributing to the inversion of the depopulation trend that characterizes them. Finally, adaptive reuse projects can be fostered to attract sustainable tourism, which has positive repercussions on the community as it revitalizes the social fabric of the latter. The case study of the research focuses on a repurposing project resulting from a public-private partnership involving local municipalities and Airbnb. Given the prominence of the private company on a global stage, the results of the study are not applicable to every adaptive reuse project. The relevance and fame of the private enterprise have boosted the media coverage and widespread visibility of the projects in an abnormal way, potentially skewing the results of the research. Further researches with private entities of minor global relevance are suggested. The case studies the social sustainability of adaptive reuse projects in rural realities, taking into consideration the different contexts relevance when analyzing and comparing the findings. The study provides useful insights to consider for the future development of adaptive reuse projects in rural villages.

Keywords: Adaptive reuse, historical buildings, Italian rural villages, social sustainability, sustainable tourism

## Aknowledgements

# 1. Introduction

Italy boasts a great variety of cities to visit, that are spread on the entire peninsula and are globally renowned, but despite the high number of urban clusters, Italy is really characterized by rural villages, which cover 54% of the Italian territorial surfaces and can reach up to 70-80% of the singular regional surface. These smaller municipalities are denominated “borghi”, and are normally distinguished by a maximum of 5000 inhabitants (Ivona, 2021). They are characterized by “a precious cultural heritage, whose conservation and enhancement are factors of great importance for the country system as they represent authenticity, uniqueness and beauty as distinctive elements of the Italian tourist offer” (Directive n555/216 of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Cultural Activities and Tourism).

The last century has witnessed shifts in the Italian urban environment, characterized by mass movements of people from these smaller settlements towards bigger urban clusters because of the formers’ loss of attractiveness due to structural alterations in Italian society and in the country’s economy. The increasing population decline trend of rural villages (Sloan, 2018) is mainly caused by the logistical difficulties of these places (economical, infrastructural and of services), often dramatically accentuated by the occurrence of a destructive natural event (East, 2016). The reasons lying behind the abandonment of the villages are therefore largely endemic, such as their characteristic condition of isolation due to the absence of modern connection infrastructures, and the lack of a proper supply of services of primary and secondary urbanizations, which can instill in the inhabitants a profound sense of discomfort in the daily living (Di Figlia, 2016). Households have now moved to more economically sustainable locations with convenient trade-offs between accessibility, services and the quality of life (Micelli, Pellegrini, 2017).

The transfer of the municipalities’ inhabitants towards greater urban dimensions lead, in some extreme cases, to a complete abandonment of the villages, turning them into so-called “ghost-towns” (Di Figlia, 2016). The demographic exodus away from these smaller villages has resulted in the penury of the intrinsic cultural and social identity of the settlements, a decline in resources, a widespread disorder of ecosystems and networks, and a reduction of experienced labor and businesses (Amodio, 2022), causing economic and social degeneration (Ivona, 2021).

Recently, however, the value and potential usefulness of Italian rural villages has been revised. They are being exponentially more considered as the keepers of an invaluable historical, cultural, artistic and architectural heritage, and they are assuming unpredicted significant roles in debates regarding the development of economical and touristic sustainability. This spreading

reevaluation is leading to a growing number of initiatives to resuscitate these stagnating and discarded settlements (Sloan, 2018). The negative trends that currently distinguish them could be attenuated through the rehabilitation of local buildings useful to development (Amodio, 2022, Covino, 2017). As heritage buildings constitute an essential part of Italy's cultural capital, the reuse of existing, unused territorial built heritage within the rural villages can be used to attract tourism, new residents and new inflows of investments from outside (Amodio, 2022; Garau, 2015), making a significant contribution to the regeneration of the local economy (Rudan, 2023). These new competitive territorial marketing strategies pursue the amelioration of the villages' performance and attractiveness, aim to boost their economic benefits in the long term, and contribute to the sustainability of the local territory (Garau, 2015; Vafaie, Remoy, Gruis, 2023). The growing consciousness of the close relationship between built cultural heritage and sustainable development and regeneration is leading to an increasing attention towards the adaptive reuse of cultural assets and its integration in urban planning practices (Della Spina, 2023; Zhang, Edelenbos, Gianoli, 2024; United Nations Development Program, 2016; Micelli, Pellegrini, 2017; De Medici, De Toro, Nocca, 2019). Italy displays the growing confidence that preserving heritage buildings and promoting adaptive reuse yields remarkable benefits, and can play a part in the achievement of environmental sustainability, social cohesion and cultural identity (Della Spina, 2023). The New Urban Agenda embraced by the UN Habitat III in 2016 and the UNESCO's Policy for the Integration of a Sustainable Development Perspective adopted by the World Heritage Convention in 2015 emphasize the significant need to support and foster heritage conservation and to consider heritage as a paramount priority in developing urban strategies and plans (Micelli, Pellegrini, 2017).

Historical buildings provide a glance to the past, bridging time differences and lending communities' cultural identities, and they should therefore be preserved for future generations (DEH, 2004). The adaptive reuse of cultural heritage buildings is a technique available to reduce and prevent the demolition of cultural heritage assets, thus preserving the cultural value of the historical buildings. It entails the introduction of new functions and programs into the structures which reprocess their usable components and help conserve, renovate, and develop specific areas and their communities (Wong, 2017).

As for Rabun (2009), "we have entered an era of disposable buildings", in which it is believed to be cheaper to finance a new building rather than restore an old one, and this has led to mistrust and dislike of older buildings that are increasingly disposed of. This common behavior ignores the cardinal importance of buildings as a form of heritage, as valuable cultural assets, and as community capital. An investment in the rehabilitation and preservation of historical buildings could reinforce the people's sense of belonging to the location, their sense of place and of local

cultural identity, and therefore counterbalance the slow abandonment of Italian rural villages (Micelli, Pellegrini, 2017). This has emphasized the necessity for a research that investigates the positive social benefits and externalities, alongside the already much researched environmental and economic ones, that can follow an investment in cultural development and preservation of Italian heritage. Several studies have been conducted by academics investigating the link between cultural heritage, sense of identity and social capital, and the various typologies of impact of adaptive reuse; this study contributes to the preexisting research by further identifying the extent of social repercussions of adaptive reuse of cultural heritage buildings within the Italian rural villages culture scenario.

This thesis focuses on the adaptive reuse of a specific category of cultural heritage asset, namely historical buildings. It investigates the extent of the social sustainability that their rehabilitation and reuse projects have on the local communities of the rural realities taken into consideration, analyzing the degree to which such adaptive reuses influence the people's sense of identity and place. The paper focuses on the case study of Airbnb and its "Italian villages" program, for which abandoned historical houses within some of Italy's rural villages presenting declining demographic data are turned into alluring Airbnbs to revitalize the life within these communities. The cases researched are four, all set in different municipalities and regions of Italy: Casa Greco in Civita di Bagnoregio, Lazio, Casa Panitteri in Sambuca, Sicily, Casa Maer in Lavenone, Lombardy, and Casa Cuoco in Civitacampomariano, Molise. The study of the projects' consequences is preceded by the description of the historical backgrounds of the accommodations and of their surrounding urban and social contexts to fully grasp the nature of their transformation. The social repercussions of the adaptive reuse of the historical buildings are investigated through an interpretative approach, and the data is collected from interviews conducted over a span of three months with an heterogeneous sample of stakeholders. The latter include all the parties closely related to the implementation of the projects and which are believed capable of making a valuable contribution to the research because of their experience. The expected result of the research is to explore in depth the existence of the positive link between the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings and the sense of well-being and belonging of the local community.

The thesis is structured in five parts. The first section presents the literature review of the topics taken into consideration, as cultural heritage, adaptive reuse (accompanied by an in-depth analysis of the existing studies of its sustainability and impacts, and by the public-private partnership form it presents in this case study), and sustainable tourism. The second part comprises the research methodology, so the research design, the data collection and the data analysis. The third section describes the case study, so Airbnb's "Italian Villages" program, introduces the urban and



historical contexts of the four cases and narrates the development of the projects. The fourth presents the results obtained from the research and justifies them. Finally, the thesis is completed with a conclusive overview of the investigation and its outcome.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Cultural Heritage

A clear definition of heritage is necessary to demonstrate the fundamental importance of heritage designations towards the protection and preservation of heritage buildings. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO) defines heritage as divided into two categories: cultural and natural heritage. Cultural heritage can be broken down into tangible and intangible heritage. The first comprehends artifacts, monuments, and buildings that present a variety of values such as historic, artistic, aesthetic, social, anthropological, and symbolic. Tangible cultural heritage can be further subdivided into movable cultural heritage (statues, paintings, etc.), immovable cultural heritage (archeological sites and monuments, etc.), and underwater cultural heritage (shipwrecks, underwater ruins, etc.). Intangible cultural heritage encompasses oral traditions and expressions, rituals, social conventions, festivals, knowledge, and practices. Natural heritage alludes to natural features, geographical locations, and geological formations that derive value under the perspective of conservation, science, and natural beauty (UNESCO, 1972 and 2016). According to the UNESCO categorization, this thesis, focusing on historical residencies and heritage buildings, deals with immovable tangible cultural assets.

Heritage conservation is often advanced by appointing a site with what is known as a “heritage status”, and this heritage designation is a binding protective measure ensured to sites by heritage advocates and enforced by agencies such as non-profit and governments (AlSayyad, 2001 and UNESCO, 2008). Determining whether a property or a building can be granted heritage designation requires prior identification of cultural heritage value. The issue arises given the difficulty of clearly defining heritage value: it is a multidimensional nature of value, and it includes a socio/cultural value, given by aesthetic, historical, spiritual, social, and architectural values (Throsby, 2021), and an economical value, given by use (market) value, and non-use (non-market) value (De la Torre, Mason, 2002).

There is an increasing acceptance that heritage buildings are a relevant element of social capital and that the preservation and conservation of heritage yields social, economic, and cultural benefits to urban communities (Bullen, Love, 2011).

The duality of the concept of value (encompassing both cultural and economic) in cultural heritage comes from the evaluation of heritage items as cultural capital assets, so capital goods that yield, aside from economic value, also cultural value (Throsby, 2021). Investing in cultural heritage is therefore often claimed to be beneficial for the local culture (Bowitz, Ibenholt, 2008), as it is the attestation of the latter and of people’s lifestyle and it is pivotal in passing on cultural identity to

future generations (Mısırlısoy, Günçe, 2016; Niemczewska, 2020). Being a representation of the community's past, heritage strengthens the relationship of people with their local surroundings, and its preservation impacts on the community's well-being and sense of place and belonging (Bullen, Love, 2011; Mehr, Wilkinson, 2020; Taçon, Baker, 2019; Vafaie, Remøy, Gruis, 2023; Della Spina, 2023). The protection of heritage presents therefore a dual function, that of contributing to the preservation of the built environment, and that of outlining the cultural identity of the community and the character of the place, so the characteristics that render the location of special interest (Tweed, Sutherland, 2007; Jive, Larkham, 2003). Heritage can thus be defined as a construction of culture and society, and as a common good representing a resource for the community and its development (Zhang, Edelenbos, Gianoli, 2024; European Commission, 2014).

## 2.2 Adaptive Reuse

Adaptive reuse is defined as a process that reuses an existing building for a function different from the previous and original one (Bullen, Love, 2009; DEH, 2004). With this term, it is intended any work beyond simple maintenance of the building which changes its capacity, function and performance (Austin, 1988). It is a procedure aimed at improving the building's financial, environmental and social performance (Langston, 2007; Bullen 2007) and pursuing an efficient and sustainable use of built stock. Repurposing may help communities, governments and developers to reduce the environmental, social and economic costs of ongoing urban expansion (Ball, 1999; Wilkinson and Reed, 2008, Bullen and Love, 2009), it is thus a resource effective strategy to provide accommodation (Ball, 1999; Douglas, 2002), and to optimize the commercial and operational performance of built assets.

Heritage buildings play a crucial role in transferring cultural identity across generations and are important elements of cultural capital, so when they can no longer function for their original use, considering defining a new purpose is inevitable (Misirlisoy, Gunçe, 2016). Adaptive reuse is therefore essentially a form of heritage conservation, in so as much as instead of abandoning a historical building it mutates its function, conserving its architectural, social, cultural and historical values (Latham; 2000). The abandonment of buildings in an urban scenario can have indeed a tremendous effect on the urban character of the municipality, as it contributes to a decay which causes less urban liveliness, and reduces the economic opportunities for the local communities (Mohamed, Boyle, Yang, Yilun Yang, Tangari, 2014). Establishments that have been allowed to decay have a negative influence on the value and marketability of the area and of other structures on their immediate vicinity, and discourage investments in the territory. The demolition of heritage buildings is additionally a disposal of local identity, of cultural heritage and of socio-economic

values (Cramer & Breitling, 2007), urban character could be dismantled when culturally valuable establishments are torn down and replaced by modern and character-less buildings. Historic Urban Landscape Recommendations adopted by UNESCO (2011) acknowledge the importance of favoring the preservation, safeguard, and appreciation of the HUL, so the past urban layers of cultural and natural values (De Medici, De Toro, Nocca, 2019).

Adaptive reuse is often used as a responsive strategy to the changing needs of the local community (Wilkinson, 2009; Foster, 2020), and taking action upon the preservation of historical areas of the city to donate them a new function is dictated by a growing demand for urban regeneration (Ball, 1999; Bullen, Love, 2009; Douglas, 2006; Vafaie, Remøy, Gruis, 2023, Della Spina, 2023). The Hangzhou Declaration (UNESCO, 2013) has placed culture at the core of sustainable development, including it as the fourth principle to pursue the latter, by generating culture-led urban renovation (United Nations Development Programme, 2016; Zhang, Edelenbos, Gianoli, 2024). Adaptive reuse is accordant with a sustainable approach to urban management, and it is thus central to a model of circular economy, turning assets which are concluding their life cycle into resources, extending their life span and minimizing waste (De Medici, De Toro, Nocca, 2019). The rising concept of circular economy is based upon the fundamental pillars of cooperation, solidarity, and long term thinking, and it has the capability of strengthening cultural heritage while fostering economic wealth (Della Spina, 2023, Rudan, 2023). Hence, the revitalization of historical buildings in small municipalities and rural villages aligns with a circular economy approach.

When pondering the decision whether to assign a new function to a historical building, a complex set of considerations have to be taken into account, that include the heritage of the building, its location, its architectural assets and the market trends. The developers, in addition, must examine three other major matters: capital investment, asset condition, and regulation. Capital investment is related to the economical nature of the decision, it covers the multiplicity of financial factors that the decision entails, which have to be considered in light of the desire to make short term profits. The costs involved in adaptive reuse are normally concentrating on construction, development and operational costs. The second matter to consider, asset condition, regards the physical status of the building and how much a potential transformation would cost, it examines its structural integrity, residual service life, spatial layout and location. For what regards regulation, there is usually a lack of support by the state to embrace adaptive reuse (Bullen and Love, 2011). The decision making process associated with the planning, design and construction of the reuse of a building are diverse and dynamic. When considering the decision as to whether engage in the adaptive reuse project, there are five approaches that can be taken to define a new match between the purpose and the building: the typological approach examines uses that are compatible for

specific building types, the architectural approach analyzes the morphological relationship between old and new, the technical approach focuses on the adaptations of the structure to meet the safety, comfort and usability requirements, the pragmatic approach starts with the choice of a specific function and compares the different buildings fit for it, the approach of interior design focuses on protecting the meaning of the building rather than its physical integrity (De Medici, De Toro, Nocca, 2019).

A successful adaptation of the building's purpose is one that respects its historic contexts and adds a contemporary layer to it (DEH, 2004), so the new assigned use must be appropriate in terms of maintaining the cultural significance of the historic fabric of the establishment (Misirlisoy, Gunçe, 2016, ICOMOS, 2010, Vafaie, Remøy, Gruis, 2023). It is paramount for the developers to acquire a full comprehension of why the building has been awarded heritage status, and then pursue a development that is sympathetic to the significance of the building, giving it a new purpose (DEH, 2004). There are existing policies and rules to ensure that adaptive reuse has a minimal influence on a building's heritage values, as discouraging façadism (the practice of gutting the building while maintaining the façade), requiring a new layer of contemporary work and not just a poor imitation of the precedent condition, and seeking a compatible use for the building (Bullen, Love, 2011). Because of the relevance of architectural historical features, it is of critical importance to define the suitable level of modifications to conserve the character of the heritage building (Vafaie, Remøy, Gruis, 2023, Conejos, 2016), and the new features must interact seamlessly with the original ones (Douglas, 2006). Additionally, a successful repurposing project must take into consideration the three Es of sustainability: it has to be economically, environmentally and socially (equity) sustainable for the urban community (Misirlisoy, Gunçe, 2016; Mohamed, Boyle, Yang, Yilun Yang, Tangari, 2014). For what regards the first pillar, the environmental implications of the disposal of a building are very straightforward: taking down a building and constructing a new one entails enormous amounts of pollution and of material waste. Its adaptive reuse would decrease the massive quantity of greenhouse gases, of energy, and of solid waste generated when demolishing, ameliorating materials consumption and resource efficiency (Mohamed, Boyle, Yang, Yilun Yang, Tangari, 2014; Bullen, Love, 2011). Assessing the economic consequences of the adaptive reuse of a building is more challenging: it is difficult to determine what is the consequence of solely repurposing, and what is impactful is not always clear. The demolition of a building is nowadays considered the easiest route, several obstacles to adaptive reuse are related to cost because of a widespread misconception that views repurposing as an investment sinkhole; demolition is usually chosen when the residual life is expected to be less than a different alternative (Bullen, Love, 2011; Douglas, 2006). Despite the ubiquitous misbelief, demolition often requires more time, energy and

money (Misirlisoy, Gunçe, 2016). Hence, the repurposing of the building entails a cost reduction compared to the first option (Bullen, Love, 2011), as the building materials and elements already exist. The value of the neighbouring properties and area rises, potentially acting as a catalyst for private and external investments (Della Spina, 2023). In addition, adaptive reuse is labor intensive, so it creates job opportunities for the local community (Vafaie, Remøy, Gruis, 2023, Mohamed, Boyle, Yang, Yilun Yang, Tangari, 2014), and it can lead to an increase in tourism. The social sustainability of an adaptive reuse project is defined as the repercussions of the latter on the community's well-being and sense of place (Bullen, Love, 2011, Taçon and Baker, 2019; Tweed, Sutherland, 2007), as heritage enhances the strength of the relationship of the urban cluster's members with their local surroundings. The demolition of an historical building discards the social values of local identity and cultural heritage tied to it (Misirlisoy, Gunçe, 2016). Sustainable historic environments should, among other things, reflect the local life, ameliorate the quality of the latter, maintain the local cultural identity, diversity and empower the community (Bullen and Love, 2011). Governments are aware of the contribution that cultural built heritage makes to the social well being and sense of belonging of the individuals, its preservation and reuse must be therefore taken into account to improve the quality of urban life. Lastly, the socio-cultural effects in the case of heritage preservation should be studied in terms of two groups of users: direct users and non-direct users (those who cannot access the heritage building's new function). The cultural appreciation of the two groups of individuals is equally significant (Niemczewska, 2019). The social impact of the repurposing of historical built heritage to a contemporary function generates cohesion and social engagement, identity and pride from the place of residence (Murzyn-Kupisz, Dzialek, 2013).

The social impact on the surrounding community and on their spirit of place and sense of belonging is caused by two prominent elements of built historical heritage: the building's authenticity and its *genius loci*. Because of their social relevance, they have to be taken into careful consideration when repurposing a building. The Venice Charter, so the International Charter for the Preservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, adopted by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in 1965, affirmed that heritage buildings must be transferred to future generations in "the full richness of their authenticity". The concept of authenticity is complex and multifaceted, lacking a globally accepted definition, and its various dimensions are subjects of ongoing debates. ICOMOS defined authenticity as the crucial qualifying element concerning values (1994). The English Heritage Dictionary described authenticity as those characteristics which represent and impersonate the cultural heritage value of a place (Nezhad, 2015). Karsten (2017) regards form, substance and time as relevant features in the conservation of authenticity. In 1977 the operational guidelines of UNESCO described authenticity under four classes of design, materials,

setting and workmanship (Falser, 2010). According to the Ninth Article of such operational guidelines, authenticity does not restrict the matter to primary form and structure, but encompasses all the following alterations and incorporations over the course of time, which possess historical values themselves (UNESCO, 1977). It covers both tangible and intangible values of a building, and the historical, aesthetic, social and physical features of a place. The compliance with authenticity is paramount and requires that all tangible and intangible values are taken into consideration when repurposing (Mehr, Wilkinson, 2020). The concept of Genius Loci comes from Roman antiquity: in Roman times not just the man that had his genius, a sort of personal guardian angel that followed him along his life and defined his destiny, but also certain places (Petzet, ICOMOS, 2008). According to the Dictionary of Architecture and Building Construction (2008, p.336), genius loci signifies the spirit of a place, that identifies the emotions attached to a particular natural or built environment, it is linked to the lived experiences and historical knowledge of a place. A distinction can be made between spirit of place and sense of place: the spirit of place is attached to the built environment, while the sense of place is subjective and comes from within people (Holden, 2012). The latter, therefore, changes between individual, communities and cultures, and makes therefore adaptive reuse of heritage buildings particularly challenging (Mehr and Wilkinson, 2020). Genius loci donates identity to a location, which distinguishes between the various places, and attaches significance and relevance to them because it is connected to events or actions, tangible or intangible values (Kepczynska-Walczak, Walczak, 2013). Alterations to a place can result in the creation of a new spirit of place, Plevoets (2014) argued that an imitative reuse which terminates in an identical copy of the original features of a building may disregard the architectural, social, functional, and genius loci of a place. In the Declaration of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (1877), restoration was deemed an intolerable exercise as it took no notice of the genius loci of a heritage building. Contemporary modification become part of the past of a heritage building over time. Both authenticity and genius loci render a place unique. Restructures should have an emotional attachment to the building (Harney, 2017; Plevoets, 2014) to respect and match both. Plevoets (2014) affirmed that a successful repurposing could be obtained when modern changes are seamlessly merged with the authentic value of a heritage building. In this sector tangible and intangible variables are not differentiated, they are two sides of the same coin, as genius loci naturally connects them into a whole unity. The ultimate goal of adaptive reuse, and of primal importance for the success of the project, is that of keeping the values encapsulated by that heritage building (Vafaie, Remøy, Gruis, 2023).

In the context of urban regeneration schemes, public-private partnerships are often used to implement adaptive reuse projects. They can be described as contractual agreements among a public

agency and a private sector entity (Macdonald, 2011), in which both provide complementary skills, knowledge and resources to the project, with different degrees of participation and liability, that result in stand-alone businesses and public services (Zaki, Jaafar, Bakar, Raslim, 2023; Cheung, Chan, 2011). Governments are often viewed as the protectors of a nation's heritage, but they often face notable challenges in its conservation and management, and hardly any possesses the necessary resources (money and skills). Hence, when collaborating, the public sector supplies the asset, the legislative framework, and the financial incentives, while the private sector contributes the capital or fundraising capabilities, and the technical skills and knowledge (Macdonald, 2011). The private sector entities often belong to the tourism sector, as they are expected to have a comprehensive knowledge of the adaptive reuse and development field. Before engaging in the adaptive reuse project the parties conventionally agree to an explicit set of regulations to follow and objectives to reach (United Nations Economic Commission, 2008). Public-private partnerships offer a means to efficiently pursue the amelioration of culturally relevant but deteriorated areas through the contribution of funding and innovation by the private entity. The private sector's reason for taking part to public-private partnerships is mainly profit-related, but can be incentivized by the possibility of responding to socially responsible corporate goals and targets. Multinational companies have played a part in heritage preservation to exhibit corporate responsibility and to facilitate the accomplishment of their objectives (Macdonald, 2011).

Adaptive reuse can serve as an innovative and sustainable solution for urban clusters and municipal realities to achieve the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) (Liang, Wong, 2020). Repurposing infrastructures responds mainly to the Goal 8,9, and 10. Goal 8 relates to economic growth, with a focus on fostering sustainable tourism to create jobs and promoting local culture (United Nations, 2020a). Adaptive reuse can serve as a way for municipalities to target this goal as it produces higher profit levels and work opportunities, it incentivizes investment flows and it improves the economic viability of the territory. More specifically, target 8.9 concerns policies and initiatives which can foster tourism and strengthen the hospitality industry. Goal 9 deals with constructing resilient buildings, encouraging sustainable industrialization and promoting innovation (United Nations, 2020b). As adaptive reuse repurposes buildings using their residual service and avoiding their demolition, and therefore counteracting an unsustainable usage of building stock, it is an initiative which can contribute to the achievement of this SDG. Goal 11 regards sustainable cities and inclusive communities. Adaptive reuse of heritage buildings protects heritage and culture through the preservation of architecture, and it can thus be directly linked to target 11.4: the enhancement of municipalities' and communities' efforts to defend the world's heritage and culture (United Nations, 2020c). The United Nations 2030 Agenda for



Sustainable Development acknowledges that the preservation and reuse of cultural heritage buildings has a positive outcome on the quality of life and the well-being of individuals and communities, that it increases the work opportunities available, and that it fosters the regeneration of cities hosting built heritage (Dell'Ovo, Dell'Anna, Simonelli, Sdino, 2021).

### 2.3 Sustainable Tourism

The World Tourism Organization (WTO, 1998) defined sustainable tourism development as connecting the needs of current visitors to those of the receiving areas while safeguarding and strengthening the latter's future opportunities. It concerns finding the correct balance in the relationship established among the necessities of tourists, the region and the hosting community (Ivona, 2021; Lu, Nepal, 2009; Stoica, Andreiana, Duica, Stefan, Susanu, Coman, Iancu, 2022 ). Sustainable tourism is of prime importance in the ongoing discussions regarding environmentally integrated tourism development (Wallace, Russel, 2004; Lu, Nepal, 2009), and four fundamental pillars have been identified concerning the concept of sustainability in relation to the tourism industry. Firstly, the concept of planning and strategy making, secondly, the relevance of safeguarding crucial ecological processes, thirdly, the importance of preserving human heritage, and lastly, the concept of development funded on long-term productivity which can last across generations (WCED, 1987). Sustainable tourism is thus an industry which aims at having minor disruptive consequences on the local environment and culture, while contributing to the generation of income inflows and employment for the local community (Pociovalisteanu, Nicolescu, 2010), and it is increasingly adopted by communities with little economic resources to develop. It is thus encouraging the organization of resources so that needs as economic, social, and aesthetic ones can be satisfied, while concurrently preserving cultural integrity, ecological processes and biological diversity (Lu, Nepal, 2009). The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas (Europarc Federation, 2002; Wallace, Russel, 2004) is among the most exhaustive policy-aimed documents regarding the development of sustainable tourism, and it intends to define the standards and lay out guidelines which can be applied by authorities, businesses, and tourism actors to tackle sustainable tourism.

Sustainable tourism in rural areas (rural tourism) is regarded as the opposite of urban tourism, as it concerns a type of tourism directed to unusual locations (Ivona, 2021). The main reason lying beneath this unconventional type of tourism is the pursuit of tourism activities related to relaxation, the desire to get in touch with traditional culture, the experience of life in the countryside and the escape from the crowd of the cities and of bigger urban clusters (Ivona, 2021; Garau, 2015). Rural tourism is therefore the consequence of the perceived necessity to alter the

tourism product from the traditional mass tourism destinations (Garau, 2015). Rural tourism is often related to the re-evaluation of the ecological, aesthetic and recreational value of the countryside and of these smaller settlements (Trono, Castronovo, 2016). It is frequently characterized by the establishment of a relationship between the visitors and the local receiving society, as the one of the former's main motivation to engage in this type of leisure activity is that of forming an intercultural exchange, of gaining knowledge of the local community's culture and traditions while safeguarding them (Pociovalisteanu, Nicolescu, 2010). The territorial identity and culture shape the tourism policies and offer, and the creation of the unique experiences targeting the visitors, while simultaneously determining the economic, social and environmental impacts that the industry has on the region (Stoica, Andreiana, Duica, Stefan, Susanu, Coman, Iancu, 2022; Ivona, 2021). This new branch of tourism represents an opportunity for rural villages to diversify their economy and to revitalize areas that are otherwise no longer competitive with respect to the modern market dynamics (Ivona, 2021). The conception of tourism as a vehicle for regeneration of urban areas relies upon the opportunity for the members of the local community to open new activities because of the newly generated demand, and to captivate external flows of investment (Lu, Nepal, 2009; Ivona, 2021). The declining population trend of rural villages has led to the undertaking of several alternative initiatives that can propel social innovation, aimed at the augmentation of the local economic resources and at the stimulation of the community's social and economic development (Basile, Tani, Sciarelli, Ferri, 2021). Rural tourism can thus be the vehicle through which depressed rural areas with low economic resources can be revitalized and sustainably developed.

To conclude, it is of prime importance to fully grasp the concept of heritage and to comprehend the social, cultural, and economic values it embodies, in order to be able to properly safeguard heritage buildings. In this scenario adaptive reuse emerges as a revolutionary strategy, presenting a sustainable solution that repurposes historical infrastructures for modern use while preserving their cultural significance and the heritage values they embody. This practice alleviates the environmental consequences of demolishing or abandoning such buildings, it reinvigorates the economic viability of the area, and it reinforces community identity and social cohesion. By acting accordingly to the principles of circular economy and sustainable development, adaptive reuse promotes innovation within discarded and degraded urban and rural landscapes. The incorporation of public-private partnerships and sustainable tourism within adaptive reuse projects fosters their feasibility and enlarges the positive socio-economic outcomes resulting from the initiative, supporting the respective community in the pursue of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Adaptive reuse has thus the potential of transforming built heritage assets discarded by society into the resources which can trigger the urban regeneration and revitalization of the latter,

contributing to their cultural and economic vitality, and thereby ensuring their preservation for future generations.

### 3. Methodology

The previous section was devoted to the literature review regarding adaptive reuse, subdivided in the themes deemed important to consider when investigating such process. This chapter intends to bridge the theoretical framework of adaptive reuse in the context of Italian rural villages with the empirical results obtained from the study. The methodology employed to engage in the analysis is firstly introduced in the initial section, which outlines the research approach and design. It is then followed by a section explaining thoroughly the data collection process and research sample. The third section presents and justifies the way the analysis of the data has been conducted. Finally, the closing section provides a comprehensive explanation of the case study, and it is accompanied by a detailed description of the four subprojects and their relative contexts.

#### 3.1 Research Design

This research aims at investigating the extent of the social sustainability of adaptive reuse projects of heritage buildings within Italian rural villages. The study pursues the understanding of the degree of such sustainability in relation to specific adaptive reuse management practices and different contexts variables. Hence, the following empirical sections focus on the analysis of the current urban and social scenarios of the different projects taken into consideration and the repurposing processes enacted in each, in order to try to identify how cause and effect are linked, and thus the degree to which an adaptive reuse project can be beneficial to the social fabric of an Italian rural village given its peculiar context.

As the research has the objective of studying context-specific social sustainability of adaptive reuse, and more specifically it pursues an in-depth investigation of the social cohesion, sense of place and belonging that might derive from the repurposing project, it is constructed upon qualitative research. The choice of adopting this research method was deemed to be the most appropriate as it has a “humanistic focus” (Gephart, 2004), and the research subjects’ point of views are valued and central to the study (Ebbs, 1996; Zainal, 2007). It enhances flexibility and exploratory power, and it is receptive of research settings and different contexts (Bryman, 2012; Bryman, Bell, 2015). It is a succession of interpretative techniques that allows the representation, elucidation, and comprehension of notions and phenomenon (Maanen, 1983; Basias, 2018), while supporting the investigation in the understanding of their complexity (Benbasat, 1987). The use of qualitative research for this analysis allows therefore the interpretation of the way individuals perceive their experiences, supporting the comprehension of the behavioral conditions from their point of view (Zainal, 2007; Patton, 2015; Azungah, 2018). This interpretative approach was therefore adopted to

better grasp the human experience generated by an adaptive reuse project, and to capture information about the beliefs, actions, and experiences of the primary stakeholders involved in the decision making process surrounding the project.

The research was conducted following an inductive approach, as it was not bound by an a-priori hypothesis but rather aimed to extract findings regarding the social sustainability of adaptive reuse projects from the raw data gathered (Thomas, 2006). This approach is data-driven, since it uncovers empirical relationships among variables encountered along the investigation (Woo, Boyle, Spector, 2017; Beherens, 1997). Concepts and results are extracted by looking for recurring patterns in the data, therefore, a great quantity of empirical observations is essential for a phenomenon to be validly ascertained. This involves discerning findings beyond the data at hand (Woo, O'Boyle, Spector, 2017; Jebb, Parrigon, Woo, 2017). As the study is conducted wholly upon the research subjects' experiences, a high level of openness towards the possibility of discovering unforeseen relationships is necessary (Azungah, 2018; Hartwig, Dearing, 1979).

Given that this research tackles the investigation of repurposing projects and the social dynamics that might derive from its application, it is empirically grounded on a case study. This allows an in-depth analysis of phenomena within their real environmental context (Yin, 2014; Ridder, 2017), providing the grounds for findings generalisable to other circumstance (George, Bennet, 2004). Case studies retain an holistic and meaningful view of real-life events, they satisfy explanatory investigations, and they facilitate the understanding of a process (Kurul, 2007). They are the most appropriate research design when aiming to obtain concrete, in-depth knowledge about a real-world subject. It is a practical investigation aimed at researching, comprehending, and examining the phenomena taken into consideration within their specific setting using multiple pieces of evidence (Zainal, 2007). The case study utilized is that of Airbnb's "Italian Villages" program, a public-private partnership between the hospitality company and the municipalities of four Italian rural villages with the scope of promoting the local territories by adaptively reusing an historical building in each and repurposing them into Airbnbs. The four repurposed Airbnbs are: Casa Greco, in Cvita di Bagnoregio (Lazio), Casa Panitteri, in Sambuca di Sicilia (Sicily), Casa Maer, in Lavenone (Lombardy), and Casa Cuoco, in Civita Campomarano (Molise). This case study was chosen because the only changing variables among the four different cases are the villages per se and their local actors, while the other variables remain fixed, facilitating thus the identification of relationships among them, and the recognition of recurring patterns from the observations gathered. In addition, the researcher deemed interesting to investigate the extent to which adaptive reuse projects are socially sustainable in smaller realities, and if they are efficient strategies to counterbalance the slow abandonment of Italian rural villages.

As this research is based on empirics, data gathering is essential to the investigation of the social sustainability of adaptive reuse projects in small Italian municipalities. The technique used to identify the research subjects is that of purposive sampling, for which the decision of the participants to involve is dictated by the specific attributes they possess, and their willingness and capacity to contribute information to the study (Bernard, 2002; Tansey, 2007). It is a sampling technique characterized by its dependence on the specific individuals' information, therefore, if an individual of interest is not available, substituting him/her comports a high cost for the study. Finding the contacts of the subjects is conventionally elementary (Mikecz, 2012), but establishing a communication and gathering observation is more complicated. The typology of purposive sampling applied in the context of this research is that of maximum variation sampling, which is employed to grasp a broad range of perspectives related to the phenomenon analyzed by interviewing subjects across a wide spectrum (Etikan, Musa, Alkassim, 2016).

In the context of this research, the sample of participants is thus composed by all those agents deemed capable of contributing to an in-depth study of the repurposing projects taken into consideration, so all those individuals directly involved and/or affected by the adaptive reuse project concerned. For each project the sample interviewed comprises of different categories of agents in the sector, which can be subdivided as (Aigwi, Phipps, Ingham, Filippova, 2020):

- the investors: so the drivers of the initiative, who are the private agency and local government;
- the producers: all the individuals involved in the development of the project, usually hired by the investors because of their knowledge and expertise, as the curator, the architecture studios, the artists, and the managing body;
- the users: members of the communities of the rural villages.

To satisfy the purpose of the research and respond to its imperative question, 17 individuals were interviewed. Some research subjects, all part of the 'producers' category, took part to more than a single project. Not all the primary stakeholders were successfully interviewed, as some subjects' contacts were not acquired, others were not responsive and some were not available or interested. To gather data from the local government, in two cases the interviewees were the current mayors of the villages, and in the other two they were the mayors in charge at the time of the project. All the individuals interviewed were deemed crucial to engage with because of their different roles within the repurposing initiatives. This inclusive approach ensured that diverse perspectives and interests were considered, and the broad pool of data gathered facilitated the identification of patterns and relationships among variables analyzed .

To ensure that all the participants were aware of the scope of the research, they were firstly asked an oral permission, and then asked to sign a consent form, to grant their authorization to the utilization of the data gathered, and to allow the disclosure of their anonymity. 16 out of 17 of the consent forms were signed, the remaining participant remained unresponsive when solicited to sign the consent form, but gave his oral consent to both during the interview. Another participant preferred to remain anonym and rather appear with the cooperative's name, this decision was taken with the consent of the individual's colleagues who were present during the interview, and deemed acceptable as the participant was being interviewed as a representative of the entity, which played an important role within one of the projects.

<b>Casa Greco, Civita di Bagnoregio, Lazio</b>	
<b>Role</b>	<b>Name</b>
Mayor of the village	Luca Profili
Curator	Federica Sala
Architecture studio	Alberto Artesani- DWA Studio
Artist	Francesco Simeti
Managing body	Carlo Mancini- Casa Civita
Guest	Pietro Gambacorta
Member of the community	Roberta Belli

Table 1: Interviewed participants from Casa Greco

<b>Casa Panitteri, Sambuca di Sicilia, Sicily</b>	
<b>Role</b>	<b>Name</b>
Mayor of the village	Leonardo Ciaccio
Curator	Federica Sala
Architecture studio	Alberto Nespoli- Eligo Studio
Artist	Edoardo Piermattei
Managing body	Deborah Riportella- Planeta
Guest	Gayle Messina

Table 2: Interviewed participants from Casa Panitteri

<b>Casa Maer, Lavenone, Lombardy</b>	
<b>Role</b>	<b>Name</b>
Mayor of the village	Claudio Zambelli
Curator	Federica Sala
Architecture Studio	Alberto Nespoli- Eligo Studio
Managing body	Co.Ge.S.S.
Member of the community	Federica Bacchetti

Table 3: Interviewed participants from Casa Maer

<b>Casa Cuoco, Civita Campomarano, Molise</b>	
<b>Role</b>	<b>Name</b>
Mayor of the village	Paolo Manuele
Curator	Federica Sala
Architecture Studio	Alberto Nespoli- Eligo Studio
Artist	Lorenzo Vitturi

Table 4: Interviewed participants from Casa Cuoco

### 3.2 Data Collection

The primary data collection mechanism adopted for this research is through interviews, as they help to explain, understand and explore research subjects' opinions, behaviors, and experiences (Naz, Gulab, Aslam, 2022). This method is based upon "face-to-face" interactions in which the researcher poses some questions to the interviewee, and can, through this exchange, grasp behaviors that have taken place in real-life contexts (Gephart, 2004; Turner, 2015). It is an effective tool for learning about matters which cannot be directly observed (Taylor, Bogdan, 1998; Simons, 2009). Interviews are used to comprehend views and personal experiences, and they are a medium for the context to be captured (Kvale, 1996), as behaviors of individuals towards a distinct situation is context-related, context-dependent and context-rich (Naz, Gulab, Aslam, 2022). Given that the projects researched took place some years ago, research subjects' might have incurred in memory loss leading to skewed observations (Golden, 1992). To avoid unreliable results due to this potential issue, the risk was mitigated by interviewing multiple individuals, and identifying some "well informed interviewees" (De Massis, Kotlar, 2014). In addition, the data gathered through the



interviews was triangulated with secondary data obtained from newspapers, brochures, and official documents received by some of the participants.

The 17 interviews on which the investigation of the case study is based upon were all conducted within a time frame of three months, from April 2024 to June 2024. They were carried out online through a video-call due to excessive geographical distance from the interviewees. The platform used was Teams, and all the interviews were recorded, stored and transcribed directly there subsequently to the consent of the participants. The meetings lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour and a half, depending on the time constraints of the research subjects, their willingness to dive in depth into the discussion, the importance of their role within the project, and possible memory gaps due to the passage of time. All the interviews were approached with a thorough knowledge of the project at hand.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way in order to allow some flexibility during their course of development: in this interview method the sequence and the phrasing of the questions posed to the stakeholders is not fixed, and closed and open questions are alternated to allow the respondents to freely express themselves (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2015; Runeson, Host, 2009). This grants the possibility for the researcher to address certain topics and areas of investigations without directing nor limiting the respondent (Naz, Gulab, Aslam, 2022), and allowing them to raise issues they judge as relevant (Yauch, Steudel, 2003). It is up to the sensitivity of the researcher to further investigate the matters which require additional exploration and contextualization based on the development of the interview (Rubin, Rubin, 2011). The interviews have been kept as close as possible to natural conversation (Gillham, 2000; Stake, 2010) to put at comfort the participant and incentivize them to voice their perceptions and experiences. They were undertaken abiding to the tacit assumption principle of semi-structured interviews for which the researcher must discern the true meaning that hides beneath the research subjects' responses (Barnel, While, 1994). To ensure the consistency of the interviews with the research question and the theoretical framework (Azungah, 2018), the interviews were constructed upon an interview guide, the most widely used format for qualitative interviewing (Patton, 1990). This instrument facilitates the organization of the data gathered during the meetings as it defines a general outline of topics to be covered.

The interview guide outlined for this research was based upon the comprehensive literature review studied previously to the empirical investigation of the case study. The extensive scrutiny of topics as cultural heritage, adaptive reuse, and sustainable tourism allowed to identify some areas to tackle during the meetings. To better structure the understanding of these subjects, they were further

organized into themes which could support a proper interpretation of the development of the projects in their real-life contexts.

Themes and respective areas where organized as follows:

Previous socio-cultural landscape:

- value of the historical building within the socio-cultural fabric of the community;
- elements that drove the decision to engage in the initiative;

Project development:

- attributes of the building which made it suitable for adaptive reuse;
- sustainability of the repurposing project;
- creation of a dialogue between the building's heritage values, local culture and new function;
- obstacles encountered during the actualization of the project;
- perceived opportunities of adaptive reuse;

Project management:

- current management of the Airbnb;
- community engagement;

Current socio-cultural landscape:

- current social dynamics of the village;
- economical changes observed since the actualization of the project;
- community's feedback.

The order and wording of the areas tackled varied among the interviews to let the participants at liberty of expressing their perceptions and personal experiences. The research subjects frequently talked about the areas of interest without being questioned about it and by simply following their intentions.

The structure of the interview guide facilitated the subsequent organization and analysis of the data collected.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Once the empirical data is collected, the following step to be implemented to bridge the information gathered with the results is the data analysis. This research adopted the thematic analysis technique, as it allows to extrapolate detailed insights from data through the generation of themes (Leininger, 1985). Themes can be defined as the combination of pieces of evidence, which are meaningless on their own, and that linked together disclose information otherwise complicated

to capture (Aronson, 1995). They are inferred concepts that arrange and order bundles of recurring information (Ryan, Bernard, 2003), supporting the researcher to address the question of interest. This analysis method is used to study textual data, and its characteristic feature is its structured process of coding, investigation of latent explanations, and depiction of specific contexts through the generation of the aforementioned themes (Wildemuth, Zhang, 2009). The analysis of the data gathered through interviews during the previous section of the research development starts with the identification of the explicit information arising from the participants' contribution. The manifest data allows the creation of 'categories', so the first output of the analytical process (Draucker, Martsolf, 2007). They are inherently descriptive, and mainly used to categorize findings and therefore provide the details necessary to subsequently develop themes (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, Snelgrove, 2016). Themes are instead more implicit and abstract, their creation demands for the researcher to intercept the meaning hidden in the interviewees' experiences and perceptions (Hallberg, 2006).

Therefore, as thematic analysis supports an extensive interpretation of the interviewees' perspectives in light of their surrounding contexts, it was deemed the most appropriate technique to tackle a comprehensive understanding of the social sustainability of adaptive reuse projects in Italian rural villages. The analytical process took place with the support of Atlas.ti, a software designed to aid the codification process of unstructured data, and which provides information about the frequency of appearance of codes and their distribution among the different interviews' transcripts.

The identification of themes arising from the data gathered through participants' observations was developed in the four phases proposed by Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, and Snelgrove (2016): initialization, construction, rectification, and finalization. Each phase is consisting of different and sequential steps. This process allowed a well-grounded recognition of emerging themes, given its thorough exploration of manifest and latent data, and its detailed and exhaustive structure of analysis.

The first phase of analysis started by attentively reading all the transcripts. Following every new interview, an accurate scrutiny of all the transcripts previously collected was done. This measure granted an initial understanding of the data, and enabled a first recognition of recurring topics emerging throughout the various meetings. This method of analysis addresses word frequentness among transcripts, and the context in which the data was generated, so the personal experience of the interviewee, as these factors mirror possible areas of interest in human communication (Krippendorff, 2004). Codes were then extrapolated from the transcripts at hand. The codes generated were of five different natures to facilitate the codification process:

- conceptual codes: used to point out key features and dimensions of the study (ex: the building was publicly-owned);
- relationship codes: used to point out connections among different factors (ex: on- site research necessary to produce site-specific artworks)
- participant perspective code: used to point out a positive, negative or neutral perception of a participant about an event (ex: negative attitude towards the local culture)
- participant characteristic code: used to point out an individual's characteristic (ex: eagerness to promote the village)
- setting code: used to point out a place's characteristic (ex: exponential depopulation of the village)

This categorization guided a clear and structured arrangement of the codes, and a careful comparison among them. It enabled a reduction of data from raw to meaningful to tackle the research question. The codes generated were progressively adjusted to be less context-specific and more generalisable (ex: from 'great media coverage used to promote the village' to 'opportunities of the project'), shifting from concrete to abstract. This step allowed the first emergence of more implicit meanings. Subsequently, the codes were sorted accordingly to their relevance to the study, maintaining solely the ones deemed significant for further analysis (ex: the artist went back last summer was not considered relevant to the purpose of the study). This allowed an enormous reduction of the codes, which went from being about 90 to becoming 30.

The second phase of analysis focused on the ordering of codes based on their similarities or differences. This specific process is known as "typification", and it consists in clustering codes into groups based on parallelisms identifiable in all of them, despite minor differences (ex. Governments' initiatives and externalities were grouped together under "external elements"). This step recognizes therefore common grounds and features among different codes, and bundles them into code clusters. Following the mutual exclusiveness concept, if a code was deemed fitting to more than one group, it was allocated within the one regarded as most appropriate. During this progression themes started to emerge from the comparison of recurring concepts across the different participants' experiences. The labels assigned to the codes and to the clusters were modified several times to reduce their ambiguity and identify satisfactory names which properly reassumed their main concepts. The 31 codes previously identified were clustered into 9 dimensions, the number of codes within each varies substantially, and so does their frequency among the different interviews. A proper representation of the code tree obtained can be found in the appendix.

The third phase of analysis consisted of the verification of the finished work. Once the coding was completed, the researcher abided to the principles of self-correction and cyclic process, reviewing several times the analytical process that led from the unstructured, raw data to the obtainment of the emerged themes. This measure was undertaken to certify the congruence between the case study, the way the data was collected and the method through which it was analyzed. A careful review of the priorly collected literature review followed, in order to relate the academic established background with the themes arising from the study. This allowed to develop a theoretical framework permeating and supporting the findings of the study, and completed by them.

The fourth phase of analysis consisted in the finalization of the process, so in the development of a connection between themes and the case study. It comprised the creation of a “story line” which could provide a holistic view of the case researched and the phenomena observed. This supported a final inspection of the whole analysis and the generation of additional ideas and concepts. In this step the results, so the explication of the themes defined, must be narrated so to be culturally and socially valid and innovative. This final analytical step was based upon the connection of the themes found with the literature framework connected, the way they explicate the phenomena of the four projects part of the case study, and what are the gaps of the research. The output of this last step of the analytical process can be found in the next chapter, after the case study, and it delves into detail into the explanation of the results and the way they respond to the research question “To what extent is the adaptive reuse of cultural heritage buildings in Italian rural villages socially sustainable?”

## 4. The Case Study

### 4.1 Airbnb

Founded in 2007 in San Francisco, California, USA, Airbnb, Inc. revolutionized the hospitality industry by enabling people to rent out their spaces to travelers (Petruzzi, Marques, do Carmo, Correira, 2019; Andreu, Bigne, Amaro, palomo, 2019; Dolnicar, 2017). Initially devised as a way to support founders Brian Chesky, Joe Gebbia, and Nathan Blecharczyk in paying their rent by renting out air mattresses in their apartment (Niewland, Melik, 2020), Airbnb has grown into a multi-billion dollar company operating in more than 220 countries and with over 7.7 million listings worldwide (Airbnb, 2024; Guttentag, 2019). The platform proposes a heterogeneous range of accommodations, from single rooms and whole apartments to exotic places as castles and tree-houses, and it has hosted more than 500 million guests since its creation (Airbnb, 2024). It presents itself as a worldwide travel community which encourages a sense of cultural exchange among users, which proposes activities to undertake and people to encounter, allowing tourists to see a more authentic angle of the destination through activities organized by locals (Airbnb, 2024). Airbnb has thus reached success and become the leader of the tourism and hospitality industry (Dolnicar, 2017; Guttentag, 2019).

Airbnb's business model leverages the notion of sharing economy, also known by collaborative consumption (Botsman, Rogers, 2011). This concept was introduced by Leisig (2008) to define “the activities of sharing, exchanging, and rental of resources without owning the goods”. It is based upon the idea of sharing with people who are strangers, it's applied with the support of technologies as peer-to-peer (P2P) platforms which offer solutions to establish trust among individuals who do not know each other (Schor, 2014; Petruzzi, Marques, do Carmo, Correira, 2019). Among the different categories of shared collaborative consumption, home-sharing is the fastest-growing one, and Airbnb is the poster child of this type of economy (Caldicott, von der Heide, Scherrer, Mushter, Canosa, 2020). Shared economy is described as a sustainable practice with a quadruple end result, which comprises of economical, environmental, social, and cultural factors (UNWTO, 2005), and which strives for a more efficient use of resources and for a decrease in waste consumption (Botsam, Roger, 2011).

The emergence of this innovative platform is one of the most disruptive latest developments within the tourism sector (Guttentag, 2019). Airbnb and its revolutionary force in the hospitality industry have caught the world's attention, as it made home renting a mainstream source of revenues (Caldicott, von der Heide, Scherrer, Mushter, Canosa, 2020). Because of its spread and exponential presence on the global scenario, it has come under scrutiny for its potential consequences on the local communities (Dolnicar, 2017; Jordan, Moore, 2018), and on the

traditional hospitality industry. Several researches have been done to investigate the positive or negative impacts of its widespread presence perceived by local residents. Some consequences judged positively by municipal communities are: monetary returns and high profits, conscientious visitors, and an increase in work opportunities (Petruzzi, Marques, do Carmo, Correira, 2019). On the other hand, Airbnb's negative externalities are studied to be: crowding, "touristification", traffic, rising rents, gentrification, and shifts in the sense of community (Petruzzi, Marques, do Carmo, Correira, 2019, Jordan, Moore, 2018; Niewland, van Melik, 2020). A growing number of cities around the world are facing severe problems due to the exponential rise in tourism and Airbnb presence, resulting in marches voicing concerns against tourism in cities like Venice and Barcelona (Coldwell, 2017).

#### 4.2 The "Italian Villages" Program

The Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Activities and Tourism (MiBACT) dedicated the year 2017 to the promotion of Italian villages ("l'anno dei borghi") in order to enhance their natural, human, cultural, and artistic –material and immaterial- heritage (MIC, 2017). The entire year was committed to the actualization of initiatives devoted to the transmission of traditions and cultures of discarded areas. That same year, Airbnb launched a national project called "Italian Villages" to promote and share the value of these locations and their communities, while also pursuing a revaluation of abandoned and depopulated villages. Encouraging travels to these smaller settlements means to support and safeguard unique landscapes, traditions and cultures, improving their local economic viability and fostering sustainable tourism. The project was sponsored by ANCI, the National Association of Italian Municipalities, and developed in collaboration with MiBACT (Airbnb, 2017).

This initiative was based upon the adaptive reuse of cultural historical buildings by means of a public-private partnership. Airbnb, the private agency, collaborated with different local municipalities to repurpose urban heritage buildings within Italian rural villages. It involved renovating abandoned or underutilized structures to turn them into unique accommodations which would then be publicly owned and managed, serviceable to promote the village. The local municipalities contributed the asset and the regulatory frameworks, while Airbnb provided the financial capital and the expertise to deliver the project. The structural costs were borne by the municipality, while the renovation ones were entirely covered by the private company. The conditions of the public-private partnership were set beforehand. Airbnb, which normally earns money through the service fee (Guttentag, 2019), waived the commissions resulting from the rental

of the structure, to be used instead locally to promote the territory. For the first two years after the actualization of the project the houses could only be rented through the Airbnb platform.

Four villages were the stages of the adaptive reuse projects of “Italian Villages” by Airbnb. The pilot project, Casa Greco, was set in 2017 in Civita di Bagnoregio, Lazio. The subsequent year the MiBACT opened a national call for municipalities to apply looking for three villages, one from the north, one from the center, and one from the south to target geographically the entirety of the Italian territory. The only requirement was that the building was publicly-owned. The villages chosen were: Sambuca di Sicilia (Sicily), Lavenone (Lombardy), and Civita Campomarano (Molise). The projects were called respectively: Casa Panitteri, Casa Maer, and Casa Cuoco.

#### Casa Greco in Civita di Bagnoregio, Lazio

Civita di Bagnoregio is a rural village located in the Lazio region of Italy, at about a hour and a half drive from Rome. It's a fraction of the Bagnoregio municipality, which in total counts around 3500 people, while Civita, as it is commonly named, counts simply 12 inhabitants. It dates back of over two millennia, and it has always been a historically and culturally relevant site. Civita is often referred to as “the dying city” (Civita, la città che muore) due to its precarious position on the top of an eroding tufaceous cliff. This unsettling condition, paired with its geographical placement which complicates trips to and from there (it can be reached just through a long, pedestrian bridge), lead to an exponential depopulation of the village. Its scenic aesthetic and its somewhat melancholic destiny have made it an extremely attractive touristic destination, and as a result the village is now visited by almost one million people per year. The dimension and the nature of the town don't have the capacity to receive the rising number of tourist, the municipality has therefore taken the decision in 2017 to impose an entrance ticket of 5 euros, which has although had little impact on the number of visitors. Because of its peculiar and fascinating appearance Civita appears in many advertisements, movies and television programs, contributing to its growing national and international recognition. In addition to this, a further element of tourist attraction is dictated by the fact that many famous people own a second house there. To adapt to the upward touristic trend, most of the structures within the village have been repurposed into accommodation facilities. The local municipality organizes several cultural initiatives and leads a Destination Management Organization devoted to the promotion of the territory.

Casa Greco was originally an abandoned, publicly owned building that had partially collapsed due to the mountain's erosion, and it was used by the municipality to exploit the area in front of it for consolidation works of the cliff. Once Casa Greco was developed the municipality created a joint venture, Casa Civita, devoted to the management of the Airbnb. The structure is often used to host cultural events, as the Comics Festival, and it frequently receives guests from



artistic and cultural fields which use the house as a studio to produce their work. The main purpose of the building is not its rental and consequent profit-making, but it is rather to use it to institutionally and culturally represent the village by hosting in it various type of initiatives.

### 4.3 Airbnb Adaptive Reuse Projects

#### *Casa Greco in Civita di Bagnoregio, Lazio*

Civita di Bagnoregio is a rural village located in the Lazio region of Italy, at about a hour and a half drive from Rome. It's a fraction of the Bagnoregio municipality, which in total counts around 3500 people, while Civita, as it is commonly named, counts simply 12 inhabitants. It dates back of over two millennia, and it has always been a historically and culturally relevant site. Civita is often referred to as “the dying city” (Civita, la città che muore) due to its precarious position on the top of an eroding tufaceous cliff. This unsettling condition, paired with its geographical placement which complicates trips to and from there (it can be reached just through a long, pedestrian bridge), lead to an exponential depopulation of the village. Its scenic aesthetic and its somewhat melancholic destiny have made it an extremely attractive touristic destination, and as a result the village is now visited by almost one million people per year. The dimension and the nature of the town don't have the capacity to receive the rising number of tourist, the municipality has therefore taken the decision in 2017 to impose an entrance ticket of 5 euros, which has although had little impact on the number of visitors. Because of its peculiar and fascinating appearance Civita appears in many advertisements, movies and television programs, contributing to its growing national and international recognition. In addition to this, a further element of tourist attraction is dictated by the fact that many famous people own a second house there. To adapt to the upward touristic trend, most of the structures within the village have been repurposed into accommodation facilities. The local municipality organizes several cultural initiatives and leads a Destination Management Organization devoted to the promotion of the territory.

Casa Greco was originally an abandoned, publicly owned building that had partially collapsed due to the mountain's erosion, and it was used by the municipality to exploit the area in front of it for consolidation works of the cliff. Once Casa Greco was developed the municipality created a joint venture, Casa Civita, devoted to the management of the Airbnb. The structure is often used to host cultural events, as the Comics Festival, and it frequently receives guests from artistic and cultural fields which use the house as a studio to produce their work. The main purpose of the building is not its rental and consequent profit-making, but it is rather to use it to institutionally and culturally represent the village by hosting in it various type of initiatives.

### *Casa Panitteri in Sambuca di Sicilia, Sicily*

Sambuca di Sicilia is a village located in the southern inland part of Sicily, at about fifty minutes from the capital of the region, Palermo. It has about 5000 inhabitants, but it displays an increasing demographic decline. In 2016 it was elected as the most beautiful village of Italy, this nomination led to an exponential growth in the number of tourists visiting and established the grounds for its national recognition. The older area of the village was partially destroyed by the Belice earthquake in 1968, which left part of the town and of its houses collapsed or abandoned. The structural consequences of this natural catastrophe led to an innovative initiative taken by the local municipality of Sambuca: the government sold the abandoned houses at the symbolic price of 1 euro. This action was taken to incentivize an urban regeneration of the village, and it resulted in a multitude of people from different countries acquiring and repurposing a house there. The 'house at 1 euro' initiative brought Sambuca to global attention, furthering its international recognition. The event to promote the pilot project, casa Greco, was done in Palermo, and in this occasion the then-mayor of Sambuca had the opportunity to get to know better the initiative and to discuss their potential application with the company.

The space chosen to be repurposed is part of Palazzo Panitteri, a multifunctional building situated within the area of one of the most renowned archeological museums of the village. Once Casa Panitteri was created it was initially managed by the local municipality, but following some organizational constraints the government decide to open a call to identify a new management body. The choice landed on Planeta, a prominent winery which has extended its business to real estate management, and which promotes the territory through the production and the sale of local excellences.

### *Casa Maer in Lavenone, Lombardy*

Lavenone is a small village situated in the Lombardy region of Northern Italy. It is located at about two-and-a-half hours by car from Milan, the capital of the region and popular tourism destination. The surrounding area is renowned for the fascinating nature and landscapes, and it is often beaten by hikers and bikers. The population of the village amounts up to about 500 people, but presents a high depopulation index.

The space employed for the adaptive reuse project was the abandoned basement of a bigger building. The floor above it is a hostel which was founded the year previous to the creation of Casa Maer, and it was created and managed by Co.Ge.S.S., a social cooperative which operates in the local territory for the promotion of social inclusivity. Their activities are based upon the integration of people with disabilities into the social fabric: part of their employees are impaired individuals, which, with the support of tutors, take care of the management and of the daily tasks of the receptive structures so to acquire simultaneously their own independence. Co.Ge.S.S. is part of a bigger project devoted to the promotion of the territory, 'Attivare', which received the financial and expert support of Fondazione Cariplo, an Italian established philanthropic foundation. From their communal cooperation stemmed the proposal to apply to the MiBACT call, and it was subsequently suggested to the local municipality, which immediately embraced the idea. Casa Maer is currently managed by the social cooperative, and employs the same management style of the hostel above.

### *Casa Cuoco in Civitacampomarano, Molise*

Civita Campomarano is a small historic village in the Molise region of central Italy. It counts 315 inhabitants, and the population keeps decreasing yearly not because of emigration flows but rather because of the extremely low birth rate. The town was partially destroyed by an earthquake in 2017, due to which many houses collapsed; the ruins were not completely removed and can still be found spread around the settlement. The municipality figures among the most culturally active ones of the region, and it has recently engaged in some initiatives which are gaining increasing recognition. In order to reevaluate the village, since 2016 the municipality, with the proposal and collaboration of a member of the community, created Civita Street Fest, a street art festival with the purpose of revitalizing the village. National street artists come together once a year to adorn the walls of the village with their paintings. The settlement is now characterized by its deeply artistic nature and urban art, which attract every year for the festival about 10.000 daily visitors. The village in the '900 had the infrastructural capacity of receiving up to 3500 people, while now it's inhabited by slightly more than 300, so it has several spaces available to be repurposed into receptive businesses. The ones available to serve the needs of tourists are still just a handful, but the community has shown a great initiative, and some new activities operating in the tourism or cultural industry have been opened.

Casa Cuoco is publicly owned building particularly important within the community of Civita Campomarano. The building was the house of Vincenzo Cuoco, an influential Italian illuminist writer and historian born in Civita Campomarano in 1770. He is celebrated as one of Italy's foremost intellectuals of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The house was then passed from privates to the municipality, and is now publicly owned. After its creation the municipality opened a call to identify a managing body, with the condition that the body had to be culturally-involved, and that the profits obtained from the rental had to be used for initiatives voted to the promotion and amelioration of the village. CivitArt, the cultural association in charge of organizing the street art festival, applied and obtained the management of Casa Cuoco.

For a better understanding of the four Airbnb projects, pictures of the houses can be found below in the Appendix.

## 5. Results

The use of thematic analysis for the interpretation of the data collected through semi-structured interviews allowed the extrapolation of recurring themes from participants' observations. These support the unveiling of meanings behind individuals' perceptions and insights in light of their surrounding environment (Hallberg, 2006). After a thorough analysis of the data gathered, four main recurring themes were detected among the research subjects' experiences.

The themes are:

- no straightforward relationship between an adaptive reuse project and a stronger sense of belonging;
- urban regeneration is not directly related to an adaptive reuse project;
- stakeholders collaboration is essential for the success of the project;
- adaptive reuse as a vehicle to foster sustainable tourism.

In the following section the themes will be carefully detailed and explained.

### 5.1 Relationship Between Adaptive Reuse and Stronger Sense of Belonging

The existing academic literature explored to build a theoretical framework regarding the adaptive reuse of historical buildings identifies social sustainability as one of the pillar benefits of this type of projects (Misirlisoy, Gunçe, 2016; Mohamed, Boyle, Yang, Yilun Yang, Tangari, 2014; Bullen, Love, 2011; Taçon and Baker, 2019; Tweed, Sutherland, 2007). Social sustainability of repurposed buildings is argued to significantly enhance the spirit of place and sense of belonging of the surrounding community (Zhang, Edelenbos, Gianoli, 2024; Vafaie, Remøy, Gruis, 2023), but the research carried out noticed differently. After conducting several interviews with a heterogeneous group of stakeholders for each of the Airbnb's adaptive reuse projects - Casa Greco, Casa Panitteri, Casa Maer, and Casa Cuoco- the final findings revealed a much more complex reality. In a real life scenario, the guiding principle between a repurposing project and a stronger sense of belonging of the community is blurred by many factors which exempt from the project itself but happen simultaneously to it, skewing the link between the two and making it complicated to describe one as the direct consequence of the other. During the analysis of the data the factors which were observed to fade such connection were named as 'external elements' and sub-divided into 'extrinsic elements' and 'government's initiatives'.

'Extrinsic elements' refers to all those circumstances which are not under the control of any of the stakeholders involved, but which can potentially contribute to a shift in the community's

sense of belonging. As the four municipalities were chosen by the MiBACT because of their already active involvement for the promotion of their territories through innovative initiatives, they are factors demonstrating, in these cases, an external appreciation or recognition of the village.

Leonardo Ciaccio (Casa Panitteri-mayor of the city): “*Discovery Channel produced a documentary with the American actress Lorraine Bracco, who bought a house here, and documented her through the repurposing process.*”

Luca Profili (Casa Greco-mayor of the city): “*many celebrities have a house here (...) Civita now appears in many advertisements, tv shows and movies too.*”

All the four villages presented extrinsic elements which can have repercussions on the social fabric of the community.

The second category, ‘government’s initiatives’, refers to all those initiatives taken by the local municipality which could contribute to the enhancement of the sense of belonging of the community. As mentioned above, the villages have implemented, and keep doing so, initiatives voted to the promotion of the local territory.

Luca Profili (Casa Greco-mayor of the city): “*we have a standing nomination to be UNESCO heritage.*”

Leonardo Ciaccio (Casa Panitteri-mayor of the city): “*we were elected ‘most beautiful village of Italy in 2016.’*”

Most of them host, in addition, events of cultural and non-cultural nature which attract the media’s attention and create a dynamic environment within the settlement which engages the inhabitants as well.

Paolo Manuele (Casa Cuoco-mayor of the city): “*we organize yearly the Street Art Festival (...) which engages every person of the community, from the old to the kid.*”

This research observed therefore how the enhancement of the sense of belonging is not simply a direct consequence of an adaptive reuse project, but rather the results of a series of variables as external appreciation and dynamicity of the municipality which implemented the project. Consequently, the impact of adaptive reuse on community spirit and cultural identity cannot be definitively determined, underscoring the need for a more nuanced understanding of these projects within their broader contextual frameworks.

## 5.2 Urban Regeneration and Adaptive Reuse

While the implementation of an adaptive reuse project unquestionably breathes new life into an abandoned historical building, allowing it to once again serve a purpose within and for the community, it does not necessarily trigger a wholesome regeneration effect throughout the entire village, as argued instead by Daldanise, Oppido, and Vellecco (2018). The investigation implemented to tackle the comprehension of the extent of the social sustainability of an adaptive reuse project of an historical building within Italian rural villages has allowed the parallel observation of the supposed direct link between repurposing projects and urban revitalization. Within smaller municipalities affected by stagnation and exponential demographic decline, urban regeneration cannot be activated solely through a project of adaptive reuse. The elements influencing this process are several, and require a careful consideration. The analysis of the data gathered through the interviews has highlighted the recurring emergence of some elements which, if thoughtfully paired with adaptive reuse projects, can significantly contribute to the pursue of a pervasive regeneration of the area.

The elements which emerged as of quintessential importance to propel urban regeneration in smaller settlements are: ‘government’s initiatives’, which lead to ‘community’s initiatives’, and ‘well-developed communication strategies’.

‘Government’s initiatives’, as introduced in the previous section, refer to the actions taken by municipal authorities to promote and enliven the local territory. Without this supporting factor, the benefits of an adaptive reuse project may remain localized and fail to catalyze broader community revitalization. The comparison of the data collected among the different projects has highlighted the magnified benefits of pairing the repurposing of the building with simultaneous activities organized by the local municipality within or connected to the structure.

The municipality of Civita di Bagnoregio, alongside renting the house, uses it to accommodate artists or figures from cultural fields, and it has developed both cultural and non-cultural activities which are set in the building, and open to the community. This has granted the possibility to establish its recognizability within the village as a symbol of the engagement and commitment of the municipality.

Luca Profili / Carlo Manicini (Casa Greco-mayor of the city/ managing body): “*We organize within the house ‘la città incantata’, so the Comics Festival (...), we also use it as the setting of the living nativity scene (...), architecture students from Yale, with which we have an agreement, use it as accommodation and studio (...), in addition, the guest speakers of our festival ‘Civita, luogo del pensare’ reside there.*”

This symbolic and representative value expresses a shared feeling of dynamicity, which is then reflected in the appreciation of the local community, and its subsequent engagement and

generation of new activities and initiatives. This chain reaction can contribute substantially to the revitalization of a static rural village.

Pietro Gambacorta is a member of the community who has organized a theatrical play in Civita. Him and his colleagues were hosted in the house for the time period of the play. Below is his consideration of the house.

Pietro Gambacorta (Casa Greco-member of the community): *“The municipality is very open under this point of view (...), I went there with a proposal which was immediately accepted (...). Within the community it is known that there is Casa Greco and that it hosts artists and cultural activities.”*

Roberta Belli is a member of the community who has organized an event within Casa Greco. Below her description of the house.

Roberta Belli (Casa Greco-member of the community). *“I chose to organize an event there because it is available and open for the community to do so (...), it is a great resource (...). There are often groups of American students from prestigious universities who come to reside and study there (...). Civita has competent and cultural resources connected to many activities and to tourism (...). A reason for which we decide to do our event is that Casa Greco is a gift for the community.”*

The meaning captured through these interactions is that of the importance of an active local government, which, when coupled to an initiative of adaptive reuse, can lead to many innovative activities which make the city more vibrant and prosper.

‘Well-developed communication strategies’ is a self explanatory term. From a thorough analysis of the different projects it was noted the widespread inadequate communication of the initiative to the guests of the Airbnbs and/or to the local communities. This inaccuracy hinders the potential benefits of the adaptive reuse projects in a two-fold way.

Firstly, a poor communication of the initiative to the guests of the house cancels all the renovation efforts made to create an artistic and architectural dialogue with the surrounding culture and environment.

Francesco Simeti (Casa Greco-artist): *“I breathed the air of the area, I did some on-site research (...), at the end I created this tapestry which displays a collage of paintings of the geological structures and cliffs typical of the territory (...). I also made three statues representing orchideaa, a flower typical of those valleys.”*

Pietro Gambacorta (Casa Greco-member of the community). *“I saw the statues but I didn’t think it was an artwork, I thought it was part of the furniture (...) I didn’t know the initiative started like this, I didn’t receive any kind of introduction”*



Secondly, a scarce communication of the initiative to the local community hampers the latter's possibility to appreciate the dedication of the municipality to the promotion of the local territory, and therefore limits the chances of the community mirroring the same efforts. This inhibits and slows down the urban regeneration process.

Deborah Riportella (Casa Panitteri, managing body): *“Not a lot of people know the detail of this project”*

Federica Bacchetti (Casa Maer, member of the community): *“Some communication have been made, but the house is barely known within the village”*

The adaptive reuse of historical buildings can therefore positively contribute to the urban revitalization of a rural village if accompanied by supporting factors which ensure its success. These include government's initiatives, which can propel community's initiatives, and well-structured communication strategies. A dynamic local government able to generate initiatives linked to the project and involving the inhabitants of the settlement enhances the sense of pride and cohesion perceived by the local community. As a result, this can initiate a process of urban regeneration within the village, contributing to the inversion of the depopulation trend that characterizes them. Hence, a holistic approach that integrates these external factors is necessary for the adaptive reuse project to contribute meaningfully to the overall regeneration, vibrancy, and dynamic growth of the village.

### 5.3 Stakeholders' Collaboration

An in-depth examination of the data gathered throughout the different interviews allowed the identification of a recurring theme among the different projects concerning a factor crucial to the success of a repurposing initiative. The collaborative rationality of stakeholders appeared to be pivotal to a smooth development of the project and to the attainment of its objectives. To achieve success in the implementation of a repurposing project and reach the predefined goals of the initiative, it is crucial that all stakeholders are aligned in their goals, priorities, and values.

The dynamics of the pilot project, Casa Greco, were observed separately from those of the other three as most of the stakeholders, aside from the curator, changed afterwards.

According to the local municipality of Civita di Bagnoregio, and to the producers of the initiative (participants involved in the actualization of the project –architecture studio and artist-) the development of the project was smooth and linear, without any difficulty or conflict of interest arising.

Luca Profili (mayor of the village): *“Everything went very well (...) the architecture studio was efficient and rapid and Francesco as well, the project development was extremely smooth”*

Alberto Artesani (Casa Greco-architect of DWA Studio): *“Francesco had already identified where to put his artworks, and it didn’t have a significant impact on the architecture (...) we had to present the project to the local municipality and it was approved right away”*

Francesco Simeți (Casa Greco-artist): *“I didn’t encounter any type of obstacle with the local municipality (...), I was asked to do a project, I presented my idea, and I received the Ok right away (...). With the architecture studio we had an exchange of opinion and ideas, as they proceeded in the planning of the renovation and design, they would show me their plans, and I told them immediately how I wanted to operate”*

The casa Greco project was thus characterized by a smooth, linear and rapid development process as the different participating stakeholders engaged in a high degree of communication, avoiding the possible emergence of any subsequent conflict of interest.

The following projects, Casa Panitteri, Casa Maer, and Casa Cuoco, presented the same curator (Federica Sala) and architecture studio (Eligo Studio) across all three of them, while the artists and the local municipalities changed. Given that some figures remained fixed while other rotated, the differences among the various relationships and development procedures emerged naturally during the study of the data. Some quotes from Alberto Nespoli’s interview will be reported below, as the studio was the stakeholder who collaborated most extensively with all the other participants and was able therefore to provide a clear picture of the different cooperative dynamics. The facts affirmed by the architect during the meeting were confirmed through a cross-sectional comparison with the other interviewees’ experiences.

Alberto Nespoli (architect of Eligo Studio): *“[About Casa Panitteri] I think Casa Panitteri was the project with the best outcome and the one I feel closer to (...), the artist did a really good job, Federica had a good intuition choosing him (...), the local municipality demonstrated interest in the cause and ability to work independently, even when we weren’t there. [About Casa Maer] The municipality wasn’t as interested to the success of the project and its final output. [About Casa Cuoco] The project of Casa Cuoco was the most complicated (...) we had to stop the works for 9 months because the local superintendence criticized the internal approach of renovation and the color choice(...) once we started again the project didn’t have the same energy.”*

Casa Panitteri, as confirmed by other interviewees, was distinguished by a good degree of collaboration, communication, and mutual respect among different stakeholders, ensuring a

successful output creation. Less information emerged regarding the stakeholders' collaboration throughout the development of the project of Casa Maer, the municipality did not play a primary role since the management body was the driver of the initiative and the one who followed the construction works. Casa Cuoco appeared to be the most troublesome of the projects because of poor communication among the different stakeholders and the existence of different interests. The renovation works were stopped for several months as the local Superintendence (the regulators-heritage authorities) stepped up once the works had already started to argue that they were not respectful of the immaterial heritage values of the building.

Below are reported some bits of the architect's considerations about the generalisable dynamics with the other stakeholders:

Alberto Nespoli (architect of Eligo Studio): *“The biggest challenge of these projects was to translate the interests of a lot of people into a good-quality output (...). The artists were the ones who worked best, as they were producing following their own passion (...) we designed the projects together, it was a very interesting dialogue (...). The most complicated part was the communication with the local authorities (...). Collaboration is based upon trust, we show each other our plans, there might be some reworks after this exchange, but then each does its own.”*

Hence, when stakeholders share a unified vision their collective and collaborative efforts can be effectively coordinated, ensuring a more efficient and cohesive approach to the project. However, if stakeholders do not smoothly cooperate their efforts become fragmented and disjointed. This lack of unity can lead to inefficiencies, waste time and money, and hinder the overall implementation of the project. Therefore, fostering a shared understanding and common purpose among stakeholders is essential for the optimal execution and success of an adaptive reuse project.

#### 5.4 Adaptive Reuse as a Vehicle of Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism is an increasingly growing convention which pursues authenticity when visiting: it is a practice that wants to delve into the discovery of cultural and social identities, traditions, intangible heritage, and rural landscapes (Garau, 2015) . It aims to escape the traditional oversaturated touristic destinations, and to re-appraise the more ecological and recreational values of the countryside (Ivona, 2021). Many of the characteristics that cause the abandonment of rural areas, as isolation, can now be re-evaluated as the features which make it an appealing sustainable touristic destination. Tourism is a vector of sustainable economic development for villages with rather low economical resources and it contributes remarkably to local prosperity. It is an industry voted to having low consequences on the environment and on the local culture, while supporting an

inflow of income and increased work opportunities. The conservation of heritage buildings supports and strengthens heritage tourism, while the latter provides financial contributions for the preservation of the former. This system displays a strong socio-economical sustainability (Rudan, 2023).

Adaptive reuse of cultural heritage buildings is the representation of how the circular economy can create a new tourism product, benefitting economically, socially, and environmentally to the rural villages.

The empirical analysis of the data collected has revealed how the adaptive reuse of the historical buildings within the villages taken into consideration can enhance sustainable rural tourism.

Informational campaigns of the projects: when the initiatives for the adaptive reuse of historical buildings within Italian rural villages were implemented, the media coverage was significant. Several national and international newspapers called the global attention towards these projects, pointing them out for their innovative proposition. Two important events were organized in Italy, one in Palermo and one in Rome, to promote the initiatives. The extensive informational campaigns remarkably increased the visibilities of these municipalities on the global stage, therefore attracting a higher number of sustainable tourists.

Luca Profili (Casa Greco-mayor of the city): *“the importance of the project relies mainly on the media resonance that it granted once the initiative was implemented, journalists from all around the globe came here twice, (...)and then we went two other events to promote it, and in one there was also Joe Gebbia, the co-founder (...) it was the moment of maximum tourism growth”*

Human-cultural exchange of hospitality: as tourists that engage in sustainable tourism are interested in an intercultural understanding, a hospitality format which is based on an in-person interaction can strengthen the interest of this industry on the village. The visitors can enhance their experience of discovery of the local socio-cultural values, the tangible and intangible heritage and in social interactions through exchanges with members of the community, or, in this case, with the hosts of the house.

Deborah Riportella (Casa Panitteri-managing body): *“We always do the check-in in person (...), it’s something we believe to be extremely important, to welcome guests and tell them about the spirit of the place, the initiative, and then to expand the explanation to the village of Sambuca di Sicilia, (...) we also leave there an Info Book about the Agrigento province and all the surrounding communities, (...) we want them to have nice memories not just of the house, but of the village and its culture too”.*

Federica Bacchetti (Casa Maer- member of the community): *“It would be nice to create ‘Experiences’ for the guests (...), I think people would like it, (...) in which a person of the community goes in the house and teaches the guests to cook the typical pasta or bake the typical cake of the place (...), or somebody else that can bring them around and show them the hidden gems of the territory.”*

The local area becomes stage and actor of the newly emerged economic activities that support and drive sustainable development (Rudan, 2023). Despite the several benefits stemming from an increase in sustainable tourism within Italian rural villages, precaution in implementing competitive strategies to attract it is still advisable. Unplanned tourism development can ruin the heritage elements and cultural values which are characterizing of the place, and it can decrease the quality of life of the current inhabitants, especially if the village doesn't have the capacity to receive high numbers of visitors.

## 6. Conclusions

This thesis pursued the investigation of the extent of social sustainability of adaptive reuse projects of cultural heritage buildings analyzed in the context of Italian rural villages. Hence, the overarching question guiding the research was: ‘To what extent is the adaptive reuse of cultural heritage buildings in Italian rural villages socially sustainable?’

Given that the study had the aim of exploring context-specific social sustainability, with a focus on social cohesion and sense of belonging perceived by local communities, it was founded upon a qualitative research. This has allowed the interpretation and elucidation of human behaviors considering the setting in which they occurred. The research has been empirically investigated through the case study of Airbnb and its “Italian Villages” program. This program was created to endorse the value and expand the recognition of small Italian municipalities and their local communities, while also tackling the urban regeneration of villages characterized by increasing demographic decline. The program comprehended the implementation of four adaptive reuse projects in different rural realities spread on the Italian peninsula: Casa Greco in Civita di Bagnoregio (Lazio), Casa Panitteri in Sambuca di Sicilia (Sicily), Casa Maer in Lavenone (Lombardy), and Casa Cuoco in Civita Campomarano (Molise).

Because of the nature of semi-structured interviews, in which the participants are free to express their minds, it was possible to observe the recurring emergence of some topics, which, after careful analysis and comparison, were shaped into the findings responding to the research question. The results of this research indicate that the extent of social sustainability of adaptive reuse projects is not a constant, naturally deriving from a repurposing project, but that rather it is contingent upon several external elements. These, extrinsic to the development of the project, can strengthen, or obstacle, the extent of the reach of social sustainability.

The cardinal condition which sets the necessary framework for the occurrence of social sustainability is the collaboration of all the stakeholders participating to the initiative. Their capacity to properly exchange plans and project designs before developing it, and then seamlessly collaborate throughout its progression, ensure its success. Conversely, the lack of communication and cooperation of these actors hampers the success of the repurposing initiative, consequentially obstructing the generation of social benefits for the local community. If the project is delivered successfully due to the smooth cooperation of the stakeholders involved, the way is paved for the implementation of some support structures which can extend the social sustainability of the project. An active local government demonstrating resourcefulness and commitment to the promotion of the local area can be a remarkable support element for the enhancement of social sustainability. The

pair of the repurposing project with initiatives targeting the local community and striving for its engagement strongly reinforces the sense of pride and social cohesion perceived by the inhabitants of the village. The vibrant environment resulting from this dynamic can set in motion a process of urban regeneration within the territory, contributing to the inversion of the demographic exodus that characterizes these small Italian centers. Finally, adaptive reuse projects can foster the attraction of sustainable tourism. The latter entails the rediscovery of values regarding the preservation and authenticity of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and as adaptive reuse is a form of preservation of rural cultural heritage, it can be used to attract new inflows of tourists. This can enhance, alongside the economical and financial viability of the village, an opportunity for growth, and can contribute to the regeneration and revitalization of a depressed area, reinforcing the social cohesion felt by the local community.

Hence, the extent of the social sustainability of an adaptive reuse project is affected by a multitude of correlated factors which can be considered by the different actors participating in the development of the project to strive to attain the most socially pervasive result possible.

The study provides therefore useful insights to consider for the future development of adaptive reuse projects in rural villages, as its findings are of significant relevance and notable implications for different types of actors. Firstly, for the stakeholders engaged in the adaptive reuse project, as it is depending on them whether or not the project will have social benefits for the community, and for who therefore would be advisable to be aware of the influential nature of their choices and actions. Secondly, for the local authorities, as the dynamicity and vibrancy of the city depends on their pro-activity in taking initiatives. Thirdly, for the local community itself, as an essential feature of sustainable rural tourism is the interpersonal exchange occurring with inhabitants of the village, and therefore it is up to them as well to be an active local community able to take initiatives, attract new tourists, and breathe new life into the village. If the communal efforts are merged towards fulfilling these conditions, the social sustainability of adaptive reuse projects can be significantly extensive.

With regard to the limitations of this research, it can be argued that it is an adaptive reuse project whose findings are hardly generalizable to other repurposing projects, as the case study investigated is based upon a public-private partnership in which the private entity (Airbnb) is globally renowned. Given the fame of the company, the media coverage and worldwide visibility that resulted, which undoubtedly benefitted the success of the projects, were remarkable and not applicable to more ordinary adaptive reuse initiatives. Further research about the social sustainability of adaptive reuse projects in Italian rural villages with private entities of minor global visibility is suggested. Although this study offers insights about the social sustainability of adaptive

reuse projects , the further quantitative analysis of financial repercussions of these would paint a more comprehensive picture of the effects they have on the targeted villages. By analysing data on tourism revenues. hospitality industry, or the villages' macroeconomic situation, one could more solidly infer the full extent of these projects' benefits.



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## Appendix

THEMES	QUESTIONS	LITERATURE
PREVIOUS SOCIO-CULTURAL LANDSCAPE	How was the value of the historical building perceived within the community?	(Tweed, Sutherland, 2007; Bullen and Love, 2011; Holden, 2012; Kepczynska-Walczak and Walczak, 2013)
	How did the project start?	(Micelli, Pellegrini, 2017; Cramer & Breitling, 2007; Douglas, 2006; Wilkinson, 2009; Foster, 2020; Zaki, Jaafar, Bakar, Raslim, 2023; Cheung, Chan, 2011 )
PROJECT DEVELOPMENT	What were the attributes that made the building suitable for adaptive reuse?	(De Medici, De Toro; Nocca, 2019; DEH, 2004, Harney, 2017; Plevoets, 2014; Bullen,Love, 2011)
	How was the sustainability of the project ensured?	(Misirlisoy, Gunçe, 2016; Mohamed, Boyle, Yang, Yilun Yang, Tangari, 2014)
	How was a dialogue between the local culture, the building, and its new function created?	(Misirlisoy, Gunçe, 2016, ICOMOS, 2010, Vafaie, Remøy, Gruis, 2023; DEH, 2004)
	What obstacles were encountered during the project?	(Bullen and Love, 2011; Wong, 2017; Mehr and Wilkinson, 2020)
	What are some of the opportunities regarding adaptive reuse?	(Della Spina, 2023, Rudan, 2023; Zhang, Edelenbos, Gianoli, 2024)
PROJECT MANAGEMENT	How is the Airbnb currently managed?	(Misirlisoy, Gunçe, 2016, ICOMOS, 2010, Vafaie, Remøy, Gruis, 2023)
	How is the community engaged?	(Bullen, Love, 2011, Taçon and Baker, 2019; Tweed, Sutherland, 2007)
PROJECT DEVELOPMENT	What are the current social	(Misirlisoy, Gunçe,

	dynamics of the community?	2016; Murzyn-Kupisz, Dzialek, 2013)
	What are some of the economical changes observed since the initiative?	(Vafaie, Remøy, Gruis, 2023, Mohamed, Boyle, Yang, Yilun Yang, Tangari, 2014)
	What was the community's feedback?	(Niemczewska, 2019; Taçon and Baker, 2019 )

Table A1- Interview guide

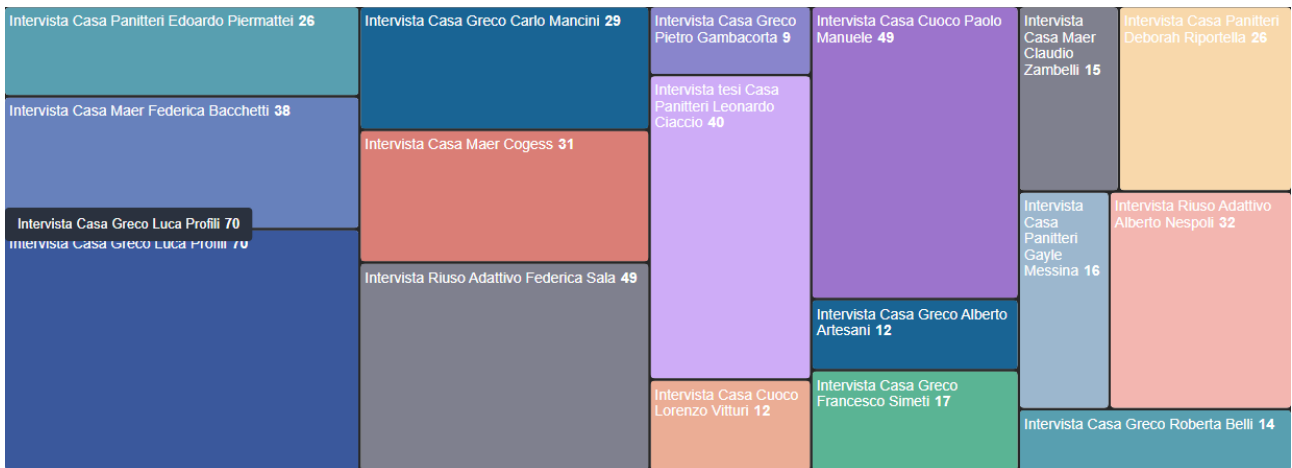


Table A2- Document treemap

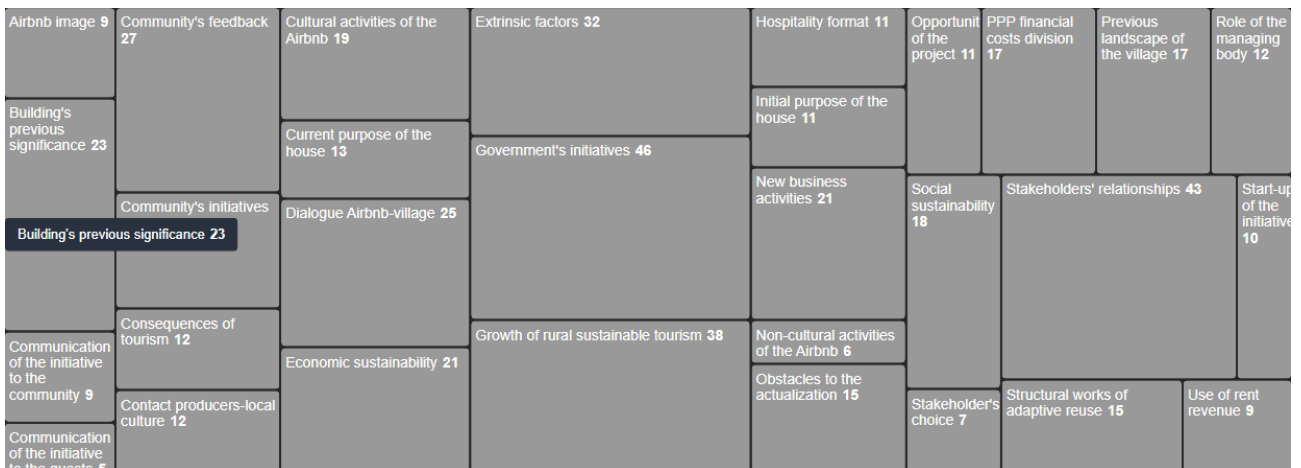


Table A3- Codebook treemap



Image 1- Casa Greco



Image 2: Casa Panitteri



*Image 3: Casa Maer*



*Image 4: Casa Cuoco*