

## LESSINIA'S CONTRADE. A DESIGN CHALLENGE BETWEEN HERITAGE AND TRANSFORMATION/

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**Abstract.** Lessinia's contrade embody an exemplary manifestation of a distinctive way of organizing anthropic space in mountain areas. Featuring stone slabs of impressive size, considering the handwork extraction techniques, the everyday architecture epitomized in traditional contrade has given life to unique built environments and the configuration of open spaces that today form an important local heritage. What is happening to this historical legacy, both from architectural and landscape perspectives is the starting point of this research, which aims to explore paths of sustainable development able to identify cultural values for contemporary society, admitting the alteration of built heritage as a possible approach to redeem abandonment or seasonal use. In this context, it is important to reflect on how an architectural heritage connected to a fragile territorial palimpsest can once again be integrated into innovative systems capable of redefining the role of resources and the built environment as new models of sustainable development. The contribution, part of the in-progress research project "Future Ruralities" based on archival documentation, participant observation, and design strategies' formulations, details the ongoing dynamics and lays the foundation for a transformation scenario aware of historical heritage's importance but sensitive to economics and environmental conditions. It proposes a shift in perspective, from viewing the historical traces as datum to interpreting them as the historical source, thus understood not as fact but as an ever-changing being.

**The architecture of Lessinia's contrade.** The geology of the area fundamentally shapes Lessinia architecture, which stands as one of the most ingenious and creative examples of vernacular architecture. The mountainous region north of Verona is endowed by nature with a distinct type of stone with unique structural properties: the "Scaglia Rossa Veneta," also known as "Pietra di Prun." This stone is found in thin, stratified layers, separated by thin layers of clay, making them historically easy to split and immediately ready for use [1]. As observed on different occasions, the layered geology underground has often found a strong relationship, in many cases direct, with human work, settling modalities, and superficial environment [2]. Due to excellent mechanical properties, these slabs have been used for various purposes both in the construction works of buildings, from structural members to furniture like benches, washbasins, and fireplaces, and in shaping open spaces, such as in party walls, yards' pavements, and canopies for shelters. The most evident and characteristic element of Lessinia's architecture is the heavy roof made of thick stone slabs laid side by side. These slabs, in order to prevent rainwater from seeping inside, were specifically crafted with grooves and protected at

the joints by other slabs called quintane in the local dialect. This unique way to arrange space, with strong geometric accents inherited from the layered nature of local stone, and physically built, represents an intriguing compendium of rational architectural solutions that maximize the use of locally sourced materials. Some of the most representative buildings and contrade of Lessinia's architecture have been patiently surveyed, mainly by Tullio Pasotto, Vincenzo Pavan [3], and Paolo Righetti [4]. This perspective on Lessinia's rural heritage posits in continuity with the ethnographic research by Pagano [5] on spontaneous buildings in Italy. Pagano's investigation went beyond merely cataloging the evolution of certain house types. His bold hypothesis aimed to show that certain modern architectural approaches were directly inherited from the clever application of new technologies to age-old challenges, with solutions already partially documented in rural architecture [6]. Anticipating Rudofsky's findings [7], Pagano brought to light how untrained builders historically organized their environments, adopting rational and efficient passive design solutions that, in contemporary practice, are often replaced by complex technological systems. Also in Lessinia, these components were part of an anonymous architectural alphabet that, leveraging on centuries of technological wisdom and inductive cleverness, gave life not only to humble yet beautiful buildings but also and mostly to urban nuclei permeated by morphological and typological invariants: the contrade. Here, amidst these architectures that go beyond the finiteness of singular buildings to encompass clusters of houses, barns, stables, shelters, dividing walls, and other stoned elements in strong harmony with surrounding open spaces, lay the foundations of the heritage dimension of Lessinia's built environment. Lessinia's contrade are hamlets usually made of five or six houses, sometimes organized in one or two rows when the slope is accentuated, while, when nestled on flatter land, they form courtyards or clusters semi-closed by arched gates. These small settlements have served as permanent outposts immersed in the vast highlands of Lessinia. The presence of small towers, basically slightly taller buildings, witness a defensive role for these ensembles, which, nonetheless, were intimately tied to the surrounding open space for hay cultivation, walled vegetable gardens and orchards, and pastures delimited by stone slabs. Indeed, each family living in a contrada's house also owned, and this marks a distinct aspect compared to traditional alpine collective properties, some fields precisely marked on the soil. Eugenio Turri, who used Lessinia's territory to test his geographical investigation methods in the 1960s, used these words to express the fundamental role played by contrade: "The contrada represents the characteristic form of settlement in Lessinia (...) Eliminating the 'contrada' is like eliminating the landscape itself, distorting it, stripping it of those values that its study and understanding have revealed to us, and that makes Lessinia admired by those who have seen it." He went beyond the recognition of contrade's pivotal role, suggesting that also future types of settlements should have been conceived with analogous logics: "therefore, new settlements should be developed according to the criteria inspired by the 'contrada' (...) Each new 'contrada' should be established as a small unit discreetly distributed within the area..." [8]. Turri's auspice has to be framed in its historical context, a time of profound but not fully aware societal changes that nonetheless had already understood the aesthetic and historical values of this

peculiar type of settlement, its architectural characters, and landscape and environmental meanings in Lessinia.

**The example of Contrada Provalo, Sant’Anna d’Alfaedo (Verona).** Contrada Provalo rests on the gentle ridge extending from Mount Corno d’Aquilio, located between the Vajo della Marciora and the Vajo dei Falconi. FIGURE 1. Provalo is centrally located in a strip of pastureland that stretches toward the plains. This strategic position, advantageous for access to pastures, water supply, and timber, did not shield it from the harsh winds. These conditions led early builders to cluster the houses as closely as possible to create sheltered spaces. The two identifiable linear building arrangements form open courtyards skillfully paved with stone and connected at various levels by a network of stairways and retaining walls. In a central area, there was one of the few communal spaces: the place where cow’s milk was collected and transformed into cheese, butter, and other dairy products. The facades of Provalo’s houses reveal a timeline of interventions and transformations on buildings that likely date back to at least the mid-1800s, although historical maps reference the toponym “Provalo” as far back as the 1700s. In the map by Gregorio Piccoli and Adriano Cristofoli of 1746, the toponym Provalo appears for the first time, represented as a row of houses and a singular volume in the back according to a disposition that may fit with the current situation. From today’s satellite map the traces of the ancient road directly connecting contrada Provalo and contrada Stefani are still visible and get interesting architectural density as this ancient path penetrates the heart of contrada Provalo. The map shows in a very effective way the strategic position of Provalo, in the center of the gentle ridge that rises between the two small valleys, surrounded by pastures and well exposed toward the south. By enlarging the view, it is possible to recognize that Provalo was the crossroad between two important routes: one north-south oriented leading to the prosperous Vallene contrada, located below Mount Corno Mozzo, still well visible, and another linking east-west oriented linking with the Barozze site. FIGURE 2. The same information is present in the Austria-Hungarian Imperial Cadastre. Provalo, as part of the municipality of Cona, is located at the border with the municipality of Vallene and very close to that of Erbezzo. This condition suggests that Provalo, positioned in the center of the beautiful ridge, enjoyed a position sought after and contested by the three administrations. The attachment to the cadastral map shows contrada Provalo in a more detailed way, recording all the properties within buildings and in the patchwork of fields. The buildings, here reported in plan, confirm the presence of the rows of houses flanking the ancient routes toward Stefani and Vallene. FIGURE 2. These historical cartographies not only record the presence of Provalo but also suggest its prominent role in exploiting vegetal resources and connecting ancient routes. A significant change took place during World War I when the backbone of today’s infrastructural system was built for military purposes. The new road bordering Provalo reshaped the relationships with Stefani, de facto cutting the ancient direct path and giving a subaltern role to the ancient route towards Vallene. It also determined the position for recent constructions, such as the stable realized in 1978 with the support of statale subsidies, a building mirroring the crisis that, since the second post-war period, heavily hit breeding and zootechnical activities. This building, realized with a low budget to host

a large number of cows, resulted in dysfunctional architectural solutions, with uncomfortable entrances for animals and hay on opposite sides, and morphologically incoherent with the traditional development of contrada’s architecture. As visible comparing the picture Turri took in the 1960s with a contemporary photo taken recently, this stable significantly altered the perception and spatial features of the contrada. The choice of placing traditional stone slabs on the canopy maintained only a material continuity with the surrounding artifacts, introducing, on the other side, a disharmonic morphological, typological, and aesthetic element in the hamlet. FIGURE 3.

As in the past, today, the stone is the absolute protagonist, employed in a variety of ingenious ways: from the heavy roofs of buildings to both interior and exterior paving to the sturdy door and window frames, and in the masonry itself, reinforced with lime mortar that reused local aggregates. The corners of the buildings, finely rounded with stone blocks shaped specifically for this purpose, likely served to prevent livestock from damaging the structures. Today, these and other solutions bear witness to a thoughtful approach to construction, practically focused on solving everyday challenges while preserving a decorous, proportionate, and harmonious aesthetic in the building structures. This constructive coherence and harmony fade as one encounters the multi-story houses built in recent decades according to standards entirely disconnected from the customs of the old contrada inhabitants. However, a simple comparison between the satellite views taken over the last decades shows that the contrada and its open spaces have basically maintained their morphological features. Buildings, pavements, property walls, fields, woods, roads, the water pond, and other anthropic elements have endured over the last years. Considering that only three people permanently inhabit the hamlet, this observation can be regarded as evidence of a broken social pact between people, institutions, places, and, ultimately, architecture creating and hosting them. This situation of fragility covers not only socioeconomic aspects but also physical ones, placing this architectural inheritance in an emergency condition.

**Lessinia’s heritage: an urgent contemporary question.** On the afternoon of July 3, 2021, the stones covering an ancient giassara (a traditional partially underground ice-making building) collapsed, causing two children playing in the pastures near a malga in Lessinia to fall [9]. This tragic event deeply shocked public opinion and added a dark shade to the debate about the region’s architecture, landscape, and environmental heritage. To let these architectural legacies have a role in the present and future development of the region, it seems crucial to ignite a reflection that needs to question disciplinary dogmas to find points of encounter with real development dynamics. In particular, it is not enough to recognize these delicate structures’ unique character and value to preserve them from destruction and modification passively. The present situation indicates that the mere protection applied by regulatory measures, planning codes, and heritage constraints discourage inhabitants from investing in their properties to trigger new income opportunities. The tourist industry, which for a certain period appeared as the solution to unpredictable social transformations, needs to be repositioned in a more sustainable and balanced framework, as put forward in the last Program of LAG Baldo-Lessinia (Local Agency

of Development) F.U.T.U.R.A. [10], which has shifted attention to local communities and permanent inhabitation. In the past decades, tourism has benefited from too much trust, unfolding through two main dynamics. One is known as “hit and run tourism,” an increasing trend of visitors drawn to the area’s scenic beauty and healthier environments. These consumers enjoy natural and cultural resources without providing significant economic stimuli for shrinking local communities. This phenomenon has led some observers to label these visitors’ actions as “Lessinia’s aggression,” highlighting the negative impact on fragile ecosystems and the careless exploitation of the territory. The other factor has deeper roots in structural socioeconomic changes. Over the last few decades, the traditional triad of houses, stables, and barns has progressively been replaced by holiday units, a peculiar phenomenon related to local tourism. While most people have moved to the closest urban centers near Verona, many have retained or purchased buildings, converting them into second homes for weekends or seasonal occupations. This shift has led to a gradual erosion of the bond between residents and the organization of the productive landscape, which had been nurtured for centuries through the efforts of farmers in subsistence economies. The impossibility of recovering past socioeconomic models should not be translated into a blind trust in external stimuli such as tourist ones. Conversely, new development opportunities should leverage inner human and geographical capital, exploring transformation modalities of buildings and hamlets that meet the expectations, or even go beyond, of those people, couples, and families considering moving out from cities. In regard to this, the built heritage impressed in buildings and open spaces of contrade need to find an active role in the definition of new habitation modes, opening to formal and material changes according to societal needs, as has always occurred in the past. In this context, it is important to reflect on how an architectural heritage connected to a fragile territorial palimpsest can once again be integrated into positive systems capable of redefining the role of resources and the built environment as new models of sustainable development.

**Towards a new interpretation of Lessinia’s architectural heritage.** Provalo, as per the other contrade, has historically infrastructured the territory, forming ecological patchworks and networks adherent to anthropological customs. In parallel with societal transformations, many contrade have progressively lost their socioeconomic values, rapidly shifting from productive entities to second home sites. Only seasonally occupied, many contrade suffered underutilization and lack of maintenance, even becoming dangerous places for people. Inhabited by only three people, Provalo presents various design opportunities ranging from preservation to transformation and even demolition and reconstruction; actions that require careful balancing but at the same time offer essential cues for innovation and critical reinterpretation of the legacy of the built environment. Building on the built is the necessary interpretation key to conceiving design actions that redeem the poor yet intelligent technological and compositional solutions of traditional architecture in Lessinia, studying its inherent typological schemes, tectonics strategies, and formal languages to find a route of adaptation and modification that meets contemporary needs. The approach passes through a profound understanding of the architecture of Lessinia’s contrade as unitarian semantic units featured

by clear spatial and construction principles, and it is open to productive reinterpretation of them, including possible alterations. In the editorial of *Area* magazine issue 166 [11], Vincenzo Latina reflects on the role of the architect as a translator of architectural texts and preexisting structures. The architect introduces new interventions within these structures, creating a palimpsest where the old and the new coexist in a delicate balance of adaptation and difference. This notion suggests that the process of rewriting an architectural—or literary—text involves an act of translation, requiring interpretation, adaptation, and reconstruction. In Italian, the word *tradurre* (to translate) derives from the Latin *traducere*, combining *trans* (across, beyond) and *ducere* (to lead), which conveys the idea of passing down or delivering meaning. However, its etymological connection to *tradere* (to convey, deliver) links it to two other key terms: *tradizione* (tradition) and *tradimento* (betrayal). Latina identifies these as the three “T’s” central to the concept of reuse (2019). According to him, reconstruction involves translation and transcription, moving from the preexisting to the contemporary. The balance between *tradimento* (betrayal) and *traduzione* (translation) shapes urban forms, as architects reinterpret cities and landscapes through acts of re-reading and re-use. This process mirrors the work of literary translators, who renew original texts through creative adaptation, making them accessible and relevant to new audiences. Latina further notes that *tradizione*, *traduzione*, and *tradimento* resonate with the English term *trading*, understood as negotiation. This concept of trading provides a valuable framework for examining the iterative processes of his research. Here, the trading of inherited architectural and cultural assets—conceptually close to the idea of heritage—is seen as both an essential practice and a source of risk. Heritage’s intrinsic vulnerability demands critical attention and negotiation to ensure its meaningful integration into contemporary society while acknowledging its fragility from both theoretical and practical perspectives. This scenario is relevant considering the structural changes affecting our society, from climate change to demographic shifts, and in light of the main public funding development guidelines, as expressed by the LAG local development agency.

The research “Future Ruralities” carried out by the authors finds in contrada Provalo a first application case to test possible scenarios for existing architectural heritage. The authors believe that its experience should go beyond temporary extractivist touristic modalities and embrace a more stable and long-lasting dimension to effectively prolong the life of a fragile building tradition. While the market is already shaking the stagnation of last years, with privates investing in abandoned dwelling units on sale, this is also the most fruitful moment to open a reflection on architectural and landscape design and the contribution these disciplines can bring to broader and more complex actions to invert depopulation and abandonment. FIGURE 4. With these auspices, the authors have boosted in 2024 an intense dialogue between different actors active on the territory, such as local administrations, development agencies, cultural associations, and private citizens. In parallel, they are carrying out design studios in the School of Architecture Urban Planning Construction Engineering of the Politecnico di Milano against the backdrop of which preliminary design hypotheses are feeding a growing sense of confidence and cross-disciplinary debate. Contrada Provalo, in the municipality of Sant’Anna d’Alfaedo, is a singular

example mirroring a widespread system across the Lessinia plateau. Its inherent heritage dimension must be framed in a broader context that accepts different types of actions on buildings and settlements, searching for innovative regeneration processes pragmatically rooted in the populace's dynamics. This means that not all buildings can be treated in the same way; some can be protected and reinforced, but some uses, or market demands require spaces that can not be obtained from the mere preservation of rural heritage. How to transform them is the question of this research's architectural experience on heritage, which, in the authors' opinion needs to start from a profound disciplinary understanding of the architectural characters as a knowledge open to possible transformation as part of a laic contemporary discourse on architectural heritage. FIGURE 5, FIGURE 6. Indeed, rural heritage consists of forms, materials, and natural-cultural relationships that embody the purpose of settlement creation and contain the foundational elements for building places of greater spatial quality. The preservation of culture and, as in the case of Lessinia, environmental heritage passes through transformation on the existing able to meet contemporary needs as always happened in the past [12]. Maurizio De Vita has described the rural landscape as an "open work," capable of linking territory and its fragments through a temporal and evolving dimension that highlights its main identity characteristics [13]. De Vita's perspective embraces a multidisciplinary research approach that ideally connects with Carlo Cattaneo's view of human civilization, where land serves as a repository of human effort, and "men must build their fields just like their cities" [14]. The interest in minor heritage, such as those impressed on Lessinia's territory, goes beyond mere documentation to ignite a more profound reflection on disciplinary tools of architectural and landscape design to reinvent a design tradition. We use "reinvent", taking the Latin meaning of the word *invento*, which is to find or uncover something and to arrive at some place. Reinventing, in this framework, means removing the layer of opacity that obscures the meaningful truth to discover, through contemporary reinterpretation, new possibilities for the contemporary habitation of Lessinia. In this sense, the applied research on contrada Provalo serves as a reference, as its innovative scenarios provide valuable insights into other hamlets and rural landscapes within a broader context.

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#### Notes.

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#### Figures.

FIGURE 1 - Contrada Provalo is located on the gentle ridge extending from Mount Corno d'Aquilio between the Vajo della Marciora and the Vajo dei Falconi. Right: photo of Provalo's minor architectural heritage taken from the main road built during WWI. Source: regional technical cartography, re-elaborated by Gerardo Sempregon and photo by Gerardo Sempregon.

FIGURE 2 - Top. Gregorio Piccoli and Adriano Cristofoli map of 1746. Source: Archivio di Stato di Verona, position: Prefettura\_179. Bottom. Provalo in the Austrian land registry released in 1847 on the base of previous surveys. Left: composite by the authors; right: detail on contrada Provalo. Source: Archivio di Stato di Verona, position: Cona\_294-05.

FIGURE 3 - Comparison between Contrada Provalo as photographed by Eugenio Turri in the 1960s and in 2024. Source: Re-elaboration by Gerardo Sempregon with the picture on the top taken from E. Turri, *La Lessinia* (Cierre Edizioni, Verona, 2007, 2nd ed., 1st ed 1969, Edizioni di Vita Veronese).

FIGURE 4 - Top. Identification of the portion of building with dwelling units on sell object of architectural interventions to test practical modes for heritage revitalization. Source: images edited and taken by Gerardo Sempregon. Bottom. The ground floor plan and elevation of the building object of architectural interventions in the context of Contrada Provalo reveals the great impact of stone cultivation techniques on local vernacular building culture, evident in the massiveness of roofs and windows' frames. Source: the Architectural Design Studio 3 "Projects for Future Ruralities" held by Prof. Gerardo Sempregon and Prof. Giulia Cazzaniga, drawing by Isabella Perozzo Defferrari, Juan Manuel Suspes Quintana, Yeraly Yerzhanuly.

FIGURE 5 - Detailed drawings on the three elevations of the building object of architectural interventions. Source: the Architectural Design Studio 3 "Projects for Future Ruralities" held by Prof. Gerardo Sempregon and Prof. Giulia Cazzaniga, drawing by Isabella Perozzo Defferrari, Juan Manuel Suspes Quintana, Yeraly Yerzhanuly.

FIGURE 6 - Interpretative drawings on the main elevation of the building object of architectural interventions. Source: the Architectural Design Studio 3 "Projects for Future Ruralities" held by Prof. Gerardo Sempregon and Prof. Giulia Cazzaniga, drawing by Isabella Perozzo Defferrari, Juan Manuel Suspes Quintana, Yeraly Yerzhanuly.



