

From loss to opportunity: a building culture for rural revitalization

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The growing polarization between urban centers and rural areas is accompanied by a profound restructuring of access to services of general interest in rural areas, driven by digitalization and dematerialization. The reduction of physical meeting points (post offices, train stations, local shops, etc.) exposes rural communities to two major consequences: first, the accumulation of underused or abandoned buildings, and second, the weakening of their social and economic infrastructure.

In response to these contemporary issues, the adaptive reuse of existing buildings to host services of general interest supports village revitalization and stimulates the emergence of new rural narratives.

Through a collection of 30 good practice projects across Switzerland, France, Germany, Austria and Italy, the “COBASI” research project investigates which building culture is currently at work in rural areas and how it contributes, spatially, functionally and socially to the quality of rural areas. Transforming a barn into a bakery, converting a former post office into a local café, or integrating co-working spaces in rural valleys require specific spatial strategies and processes whose effects go far beyond the sustainability aspects of transformation. This contribution presents some of the key findings of the good practices analysis. To combine architectural transformation with socio-cultural improvement in rural areas, several factors need to be integrated in the project process, including the involvement of polyvalent stakeholders, the diversification of functions and the flexibility of uses.

The results presented aim both to contribute to the debate of future rural development and to deliver actionable strategies for architects, municipalities, and inhabitants willing to engage in rural revitalization.