

Consuelo Diodati

Urbanization and Tourism on the Abruzzo Coast



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37 Abstract

Urbanization and Tourism on the Abruzzo Coast^a

Consuelo Diodati^b

1. Foreword

Considering the most recent developments in tourism demand trends — waning interest in mass resorts and growing popularity of destinations that offer naturalistic, cultural and physical exercise activities that emphasize authenticity, discovery, introspection and quiet (in other words, those things that Baudrillard calls “new rarities”) — the Abruzzo Coast should be ideally suited to meet this type of demand precisely because of the remarkable diversity that is the hallmark of its territory.

The reasons for this study stem from the realization that the resident population and the local administrations are not taking advantage of these opportunities as a direct result of the urban planning pursued in this area, which has focused on intensively exploiting the territory and its resources, rather than effectively protecting it, conserving it and enhancing it.

The Abruzzo Coast is still relatively intact and represents an extension and logical end point of the sloping foothills at its back — many of which are home to such major archaeological and historical sites as Civitella and Atri, just to name a couple — and the Gran Sasso National Park and Monti della Laga mountain ranges. Despite these characteristics, the emphasis continues to be on attracting low profile, largely undifferentiated mass tourism. More importantly, the focus is exclusively on beach resorts, ignoring the fact that in recent years the num-

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ber of tourists who choose this type of destination has been decreasing steadily.

As a result, the lack of a development model oriented toward the promotion, protection and conservation of natural resources and the original characteristics of these areas makes it impossible to safeguard the territory's identity. Consequently, the identity/image that is being projected is not particularly attractive and inadequate to meet the challenges posed by the new developments in tourism demand that characterize the era of globalization.

2. Analysis of the territory

The beach resorts along the Abruzzo Coast, particularly those located in the Province of Teramo, are faced with serious issues in terms of their territorial identity.

This is partly because these areas were left to their own devices during the first half of the 1900s, when they were infested by malaria (some locations where swamps have remained are now being turned into nature preserves). Reclamation projects and the resulting seashore tourism development started only in the 1950s. Hence, these areas were settled only relatively recently. In practice, there was little or no development along the Abruzzo Coast, except for the vacation homes, or rather, the villas of wealthy families that owned property in the neighboring hills (see on this subject a monumental work on the seashore villas in the Province of Teramo by the art historian Nerio Rosa), the adjoining caretaker cottages and the *casini*, shacks built directly on the beach and used for temporary storage.

The passing of time and, to a greater extent, the crisis of agriculture and the development of highway and railroad infrastructures along the Adriatic corridor produced a decentralization of the main territorial areas from the hills toward the shore that caused the territory to be divided into longitudinal segments. As a result of this shift, farmers (sharecroppers) began to move from the hills toward the shore, creating settlements of

the “scattered houses” type, consisting of dwellings that were still true to a farming matrix. These were single-story or, at most, two-story houses with several sheds for farm implements and firewood, barns for small animals and, more importantly, a plot for a vegetable garden.

The farming roots of the current seashore communities can also be seen in the local food and winemaking traditions, which is strongly based on land rather than sea food sources. Culinary traditions related to fishing tend to be limited and disappointing precisely because of their recent origins.

Obviously, the urban layout of the towns created by the shifts and relocations discussed above is fairly unstructured. They lack a center with a proliferation of satellites around it. In addition, the fact that they are traversed by National Route 16 and the national Adriatic railroad corridor, which link Northern and Southern Italy, reinforced the already strong fragmentation of the territory into longitudinal sections that are not effectively interconnected. This is particularly true in those towns that lack a highway bypass, which, instead, hems them in almost completely toward the sea.

An even greater problem is the absence of specific urban planning restrictions on the replacement of existing buildings with more modern structures (in urban centers that are historically or archaeologically significant, for example, there are specific restrictions by the relevant government agencies that prohibit the demolition of certain buildings, regulate renovation and construction, etc.).

The older houses, which were built haphazardly at different times, while lacking a sense of unity, had a clear farming identity, whereas the more recent structures were designed to meet the needs of new residents and, primarily, exploit tourism opportunities. The result is a starkly contradictory image, which, however, encompasses a clear desire for renewal in accordance with more modern and functional standards.

These areas are home to discordant environments: old farm houses and the antique villas of wealthy land owners are contrasted by large hotels and scores of anonymous, hypermodern, multistory buildings that are hardly compatible with the soft

lines of a landscape of hills that slowly descend toward the sea (this area is known for its olive groves and premium grapevine varieties that specifically require gently sloping hills).

The resulting general impression is that of a territory that lacks a unitary and recognizable local identity, other than the one provided by its very fragmentation. The process of unrestrained construction and destruction of anything old is steadily going forward without much outrage, without anyone questioning the wisdom of continuing to erect buildings that sit empty during the tourism off-season (nine months out of twelve) creating the impression of actual ghost towns.

It is my belief that, if we are to address issues related to the territory, we must start by facing reality, which is the scenario outlined in the moderately critical remarks provided above, asking ourselves how the local identity of these locations can be developed or rebuilt.

Such identity bears in part the imprint of old wealthy families, encompasses the heritage of a farming culture that moved to the seashore (evidence of this is the fact that, emphasizing their fragmentation, these towns are almost always split into two communities, one in the hills and one by the shore — a typical example is Giulianova, which includes Giulianova Proper and Giulianova by the Sea) and is also the result of the impact of visitors. The visitor factor poses a difficult problem because the presence of a high number of tourists or other parties who visit a location that lacks clear building rules and restrictions, instead of being a resource, can set in motion a process that completely erases an area's identity, without any respect for its origins, effectively erasing the area itself.

Given the current situation, it is urgent that the local communities be made aware of the importance of conserving, safeguarding and promoting local resources before these issues are addressed with the tourists. For example, some owners of the charming farm houses that are typical of these areas, which in some cases require minor renovations, build hypermodern homes next to the existing structures not so much because they need the additional space but rather to show off their new house.

It is then precisely the lack of awareness of certain issues that runs the risk of becoming a cause of the deterioration of the territories subject of this analysis, the typicality identity of which is best defined by the early, small houses of those who moved from the farms to the seashore. Moreover, because the owners of these houses have not yet fully accepted that their environment has changed, it sometimes happens that right around the corner one can still find a planted field, a patchwork of vegetable gardens and even see a rabbit or a duck that ran away from their enclosures. In winter, sometimes one could have the mistaken impression that a fire broke out somewhere, as people light up their wood-burning fireplaces (even those who live on the third floor), even though they may be right in the middle of a town equipped with a natural gas supply network.

These elements are reinforced by the fact that this territory's farming identity is still firmly grounded in an ethos that Banfield called "amoral familism". According to this approach, which is typical of farmers in Southern Italy, people tend to always act selfishly/individualistically to benefit themselves and their families and always look askance at any project that pursues the common good. This attitude is justified in part by the exploitation suffered by most of the farmers who worked as sharecroppers.

Nevertheless, the reality is still one in which ascriptive elements — who we are, whose children we are — are much more important than the acquisitive elements — what capabilities we have. In this environment, the approach of the public administration does not help the population to grow because it is based on a top-down system with limited participation and often cronyism, a system that in many ways is nothing more than an extension of the sharecropping tradition.