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Balancing Shrinkage and Heritage in Middle Italy

Strategic Framework for Depopulated Historic Centres

A Master's Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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Abstract

Urban shrinkage has been happening across many European cities for more than a century, and today it has become a major topic in urban planning. In Italy, this discussion is often framed through a territorial hierarchy: on one side there are metropolitan areas, seen as the main engines of growth even when they face restructuring, and on the other side there are the Aree Interne and small Borghi, which are clearly recognised as fragile and supported through specific national strategies. Between these two categories lies a large intermediate territory that is often overlooked.

This study focuses on how shrinkage is experienced within the historic centers of medium-sized towns located in this intermediate territorial condition. Historic city centers are the oldest parts of towns, often formed during medieval or early modern periods, and characterized by dense urban fabric, narrow streets, historic buildings, churches, and public spaces that reflect local identity and continuity. Even though they represent a significant share of Italy's territory and population, these areas are often considered "still functioning", which hides slow processes of population loss, ageing, and functional decline.

In medium-sized towns, historic centers are identified not only by their architectural value, but also by their role as the symbolic and morphological core of the city. Even with heritage protection, many of these centers are gradually losing residents, everyday services, and stable uses. Shrinkage here appears less as collapse and more as vacancy, underuse, and the slow erosion of daily urban life.

The research is guided by two main questions: *How can historic centres of medium-sized towns in Middle Italy be identified and addressed under conditions of long-term urban shrinkage? And To what extent are existing policies developed for inland borghi applicable to the historic centres of medium-sized cities?*. These questions frame the investigation of both spatial conditions and policy limitations.

The study follows a step-by-step methodology:

- Quantitative territorial analysis to map long-term demographic and socio-economic trends and to identify areas where shrinkage is persistent and structural.
- Territorial filtering to focus on intermediate contexts, excluding metropolitan cores and areas strongly influenced by major economic hubs.
- Case study selection and assessment, combining demographic indicators with the presence of significant historic centers to identify representative medium-sized towns.
- Qualitative investigation through field visits, interviews, photographic surveys, planning documents, and heritage analysis to understand how shrinkage materializes within historic urban fabric and everyday spaces.

Based on this approach, the research develops place-based strategies for selected case studies and reflects on how inland-area and Borghi policies could be adapted for medium-sized historic centres. The outcome is not a fixed action plan for a single city, but a flexible framework that can be transferred to other shrinking historic towns. The aim is not only to bring growth back, but to keep these places liveable, meaningful, and connected to their heritage even as they continue to shrink.

Abstract (In Italian)

La contrazione urbana si verifica in molte città europee da più di un secolo, e oggi è diventata uno degli argomenti centrali dell'urbanistica. In Italia, questa discussione viene spesso inquadrata in una visione gerarchica del territorio: da un lato ci sono le aree metropolitane, viste come i principali motori di crescita anche quando affrontano una ristrutturazione, e dall'altro ci sono le "aree interne" e i piccoli borghi, che sono chiaramente riconosciuti come fragili e che vengono supportati da specifiche strategie nazionali. Tra queste due categorie si colloca un ampio territorio intermedio che viene spesso trascurato.

Questo studio si concentra su come viene vissuta la contrazione urbana nei centri storici delle città di medie dimensioni localizzate in questa condizione territoriale intermedia. I centri storici sono le parti più antiche delle città, spesso formatesi durante il Medioevo o la prima Età Moderna, e caratterizzate da un tessuto urbano denso, strade strette, edifici storici, chiese e spazi pubblici che riflettono l'identità locale e la continuità storica. Nonostante rappresentino una parte significativa del territorio e della popolazione italiana, queste aree sono spesso considerate "ancora funzionanti", cosa che tiene nascosti i lenti processi di spopolamento, invecchiamento e declino funzionale.

Nelle città di medie dimensioni i centri storici si riconoscono non solo per il loro valore architettonico, ma anche per il loro ruolo di cuore simbolico e morfologico della città. Anche con la tutela del patrimonio, molti di questi centri stanno progressivamente perdendo residenti, servizi quotidiani e usi stabili. La contrazione qui si manifesta meno come collasso e più come svuotamento, sottoutilizzo e lenta erosione della vita quotidiana della città.

La ricerca è guidata da due domande principali: *come possono essere individuati e trattati i centri storici delle città medie dell'Italia di mezzo in condizioni di contrazione urbana di lungo periodo?* E fino a che punto le politiche sviluppate per i borghi interni sono applicabili ai centri storici delle città di medie dimensioni? Queste domande inquadrano la ricerca sia sulle condizioni spaziali sia sulle limitazioni delle politiche.

Lo studio segue una metodologia step-by-step:

- Analisi territoriale quantitativa per mappare le tendenze demografiche e socioeconomiche di lungo termine e per individuare le aree dove la contrazione è persistente e strutturale.
- Selezione territoriale per concentrarsi sui contesti intermedi, escludendo i centri metropolitani e le aree fortemente influenzate dai principali hub economici.
- Selezione e analisi di casi studio, combinando indicatori demografici con la presenza di centri storici significativi, per individuare città medie rappresentative
- Ricerca qualitativa tramite sopralluoghi, interviste, rilievi fotografici, documenti di pianificazione, e analisi del patrimonio per capire come la contrazione si materializza nel tessuto urbano storico e negli spazi della vita quotidiana.

Basandosi su questo approccio, la ricerca sviluppa strategie radicate al territorio per i casi studio selezionati e riflette su come le politiche per le aree interne e per i borghi potrebbero essere adattate ai centri storici delle città di medie dimensioni. Il risultato non è un piano d'azione rigido per una singola città, ma un quadro flessibile che può essere trasferito ad altre città storiche in contrazione. Lo scopo non è invertire la contrazione, ma mantenere questi ambienti vivibili, significativi e socialmente radicati, capaci di sostenere la vita quotidiana e il patrimonio anche in condizioni di declino a lungo termine.

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Introduction

Urban shrinkage has become a visible and persistent condition in many historic cities across Italy. Over the past decades, population decline, economic stagnation, and the gradual abandonment of historic centres have reshaped how these places function and how people live in them. While global demographic shifts play a role, the impact is deeply territorial: empty houses, unused public spaces, and heritage buildings that slowly lose their social meaning. Yet, these same places hold a remarkable concentration of cultural, architectural, and historical value that cannot be dismissed. The challenge today is to understand how heritage can remain alive and relevant in cities that are slowly losing their populations.

This research examines shrinkage specifically through the lens of Middle Italy, engaging heritage conservation and urban resilience as central perspectives. Italia di Mezzo represents a distinctive territorial condition situated between large metropolitan cities and remote inner areas, commonly associated with the Italian "provincia." It is characterised by historic medium-sized centres and dispersed territories that were once strongly interconnected through local economies and regional networks. Today, these places are gradually losing demographic weight and functional relevance, yet they continue to hold an extraordinary concentration of architectural heritage, cultural memory, and spatial identity. Shrinkage here does not appear as sudden collapse, but as progressive underuse, ageing populations, and the slow erosion of everyday urban life within intact historic fabrics.

By focusing on selected towns within this intermediate geography, the study explores how adaptive reuse, selective concentration, and context-sensitive planning approaches can support shrinking historic centres. The aim is not to restore growth, but to understand how these territories can remain liveable and meaningful under long-term demographic contraction. Through territorial analysis and micro-scale spatial investigation, the research develops a strategic framework that emphasises stewardship, continuity, and calibrated intervention. In doing so, it contributes to a broader reflection on the future of Italy's historic settlements and the evolving character of Italia di Mezzo.

Key words
Heritage conservation, Economic revitalization, Urban resilience, Historical city centres, Depopulation

Research Questions
Many historic Italian centres continue to lose residents due to ageing populations, migration, limited job opportunities, and the increasing gap between daily life and tourism-driven economies.

Main Research Question
How can historic centres of medium-sized towns in Middle Italy be identified and addressed under conditions of long-term urban shrinkage?

Sub-questions
Which spatial, demographic, and functional indicators allow the recognition of shrinking historic centres in medium-sized towns?

To what extent are existing policies developed for inland borghi applicable to the historic centres of medium-sized cities?

Problem Statement
In recent decades, Italy's territorial structure has undergone major transformations, revealing strong contrasts between growing metropolitan poles and a broad set of territories that remain structurally and institutionally in-between. Many historic towns within this belt, are experiencing steady population decline, **the erosion of services**, and increasing difficulty in maintaining their built heritage. These dynamics are not episodic; they reflect **long-term structural changes** that have reshaped mobility, labour markets, and regional centrality.

Despite these clear patterns, **Italy's planning frameworks remain predominantly growth oriented, creating a partial mismatch with the realities of Intermediate Italy.** Consequently, shrinking towns often lack fully tailored tools, heightening vulnerability for their heritage assets, social cohesion, and spatial quality.

Historic centres in Italia di Mezzo are particularly fragile. As younger populations move towards larger cities, many buildings remain empty, maintenance becomes unaffordable, and public spaces lose their social function. At the same time, tourism-driven pressures do not necessarily lead to balanced development, creating gaps between resident needs and external consumption.

This research addresses the urgent need to conceptualize and a need for a place-based, heritage-led approach to urban revitalization in shrinking areas, focusing on the often-overlooked intermediate territories of Italy

Scope, Delimitations and Assumptions
The scope of this research is geographically and thematically focused on the concept of urban shrinkage in Italy, emphasis on "Italia di mezzo".

These areas are characterized by demographic decline, infrastructural marginality, and the presence of significant cultural and architectural heritage.

The primary delimitations include:
- A focus on small- to medium sized historic cities and towns rather than large metropolitan centres.
- Concentration on demographic and socio-spatial trends from the late 20th century to the present.
- Emphasis on heritage revitalisation rather than purely economic or technological approaches.

Assumptions guiding this study include:
- Urban shrinkage in Italy is a structural condition, not a temporary anomaly.
- Heritage can be repositioned as an asset in planning strategies for shrinking cities.
- Inter-scalar governance and citizen engagement are critical to successful revitalization.

Methodological and Research Design

Diagnostic Phase

This phase focuses on building a strong conceptual and policy-based understanding of urban shrinkage.
- Review of **international and Italian literature** on urban shrinkage, with particular attention to historic cities, Italia di mezzo, and aree interne.
- Review of **existing case studies and projects implemented in inland areas and borghi**, focusing on their policy structure, strategies, and long-term sustainability.
- Identification of key themes, limitations, and **gaps in existing approaches**, especially in relation to medium-sized historic centres.

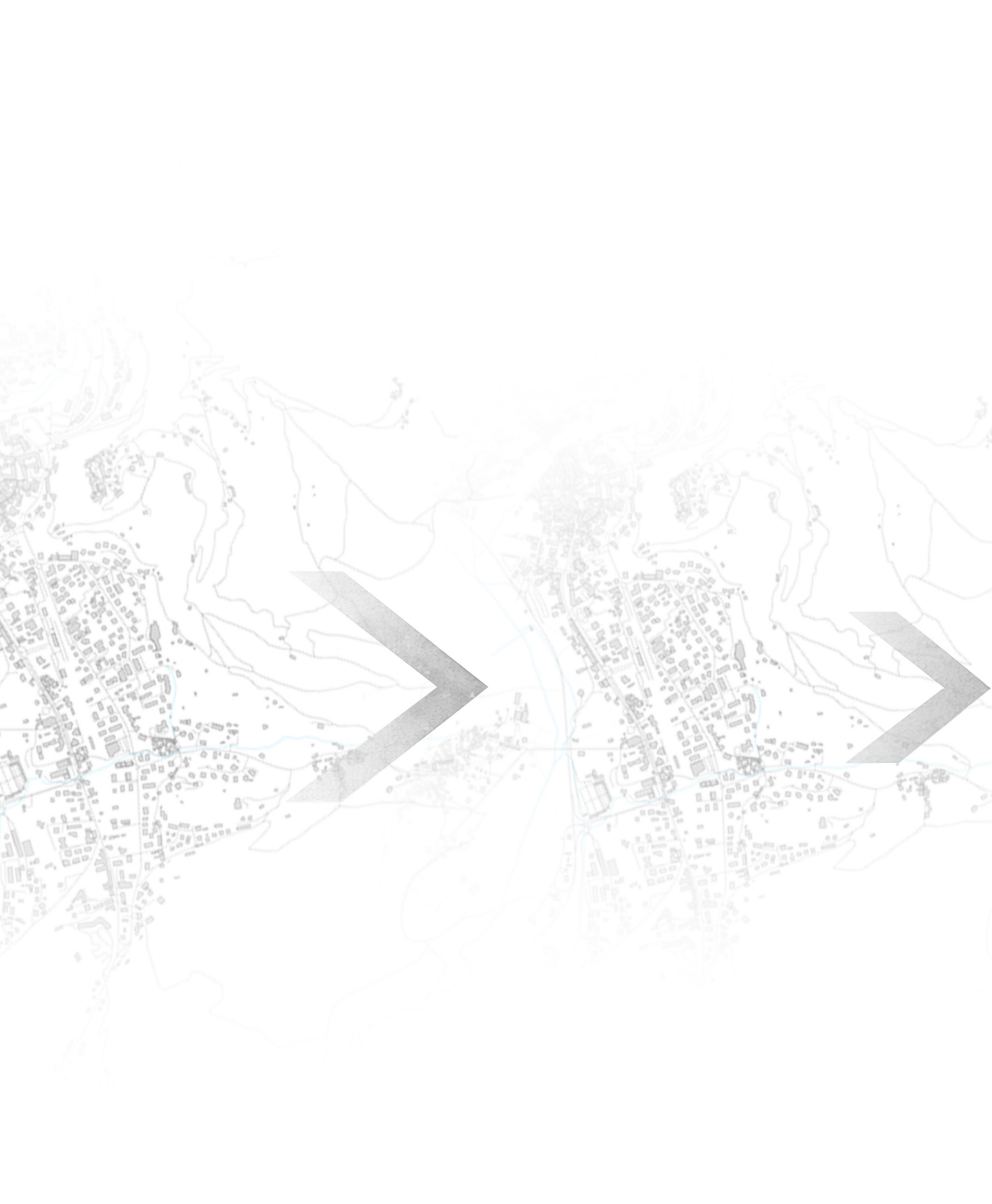
Analytical Phase

The second phase focuses on empirical analysis at different spatial scales.
- **Demographic analysis** of regions and cities, including population change, ageing trends, and migration patterns.
- Analysis of housing vacancy, service loss, and **spatial patterns of decline** at the macro and regional scale.
- Filtering and **selection of areas for intervention** by identifying provinces and historic centres experiencing critical shrinkage conditions.
- **Micro-scale analysis of selected areas** through mapping, field surveys, interviews, and problem framing tools such as SWOT analysis.
- Synthesis of findings into an **overarching framework of shared problems** across all study areas.

Strategic Phase

The final phase translates analytical findings into planning and policy proposals.
- Development of **area-based solutions for shrinking historic centres**, informed by the case-study analysis of existing inland-area and borghi projects.
- Adaptation of these solutions to the specific conditions of medium-sized historic cities.
- Integration of local strategies into a broader framework including phasing, timelines, tools, and governance structures.
- Evaluation of the **framework's transferability and applicability** to other shrinking cities in Italia di mezzo.





Chapter I

The Urban Shrinkage Phenomenon: Definitions and Interpretations

1.1 What Shrinkage Means for Cities

Urban shrinkage has often been treated as an anomaly within planning discourse, interpreted as a temporary crisis or a failure to recover from economic or demographic shocks. Yet across many European contexts, population decline, ageing, and functional contraction have persisted for decades, reshaping cities in ways that cannot be addressed through growth oriented models alone. Shrinkage is not simply a numerical reduction, but a spatial and social process that alters how cities are inhabited, maintained, and governed over time. Understanding this condition requires moving beyond deficit-based narratives and situating shrinkage within longer historical, economic, and territorial trajectories that continue to shape urban form and everyday life.

For most of this period, city planning and economic thought were almost entirely oriented toward managing growth. Today, this picture is changing. Countries such as Italy, Germany, Japan, and Russia are already experiencing population decline; in many cases, urbanisation has peaked and begun to reverse. Even where economies still grow, social and spatial polarisation is intensifying. Shrinkage in one place can feed growth in another. Importantly, **shrinkage is not simply the opposite of growth but a parallel trajectory**, where both processes can coexist in different parts of the same territory.

Like growth, shrinkage is a process of transformation that belongs to a specific historical phase. Some cities may disappear; others may decline and then stabilise at a smaller scale; some may even return to growth later. Growth itself was never only positive, industrial overcrowding, housing shortages, or contemporary megacity slums are all examples of its darker side. Similarly, shrinkage is not purely negative. Over time, it produces deep changes and may lead to new principles, models, and practices that reorient societies, just as growth once did.

Herwig Birg describes the current demographic shift as a turning point, for the first time, population shrinkage is occurring without a major external shock such as war, famine, or epidemic, and in a context of relative peace and prosperity (Birg, 2001). This makes today's transition historically unique.

At the same time, global urbanisation has reached new highs. Today, around 8.3 billion people live on Earth, and 4.61 billion of them reside in cities. Since **the early 21st century, more than half of the world's population has lived in urban areas**, and urban populations continue to grow by tens of millions each year. Yet this expansion coexists with a demographic reversal, many countries are moving from centuries of population growth into an extended phase of population decline.

Over the past three decades, globalisation has reshaped the geography of growth and decline. While some regions have continued to expand, others, often former industrial areas have entered long phases of shrinkage. At a global scale, this process can be broadly grouped into ,

- **Deindustrialisation** refers to the redistribution of industries and services within the global division of labour, causing some cities and regions to lose economic relevance as production and employment relocate elsewhere.
- **Suburbanisation** involves the outward movement of residents, jobs, and services from dense urban cores to surrounding areas, leaving central areas with vacancies, declining demand, and weakened local economies.
- **Post-socialist transformation** describes the structural transition from socialist political and economic systems to new models, often resulting in rapid reorganisation and decline in specific cities and regions.

Demographic ageing is another key driver of shrinkage. Over the last fifty years, **birth rates have declined worldwide**, both in developing and industrialised countries. Although ageing is more advanced in industrialised regions, it is progressing globally. In these contexts, the old-age dependency ratio is expected to increase significantly over the coming decades, confirming ageing as a structural demographic condition rather than a temporary trend.

According to the United Nations Population Division, global fertility rates have been declining for decades and are projected to fall below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman between 2030 and 2035. While global population growth may stabilise before

mid-century, this apparent equilibrium masks continuous decline in regions where low fertility persists. In such cases, demographic processes do not stabilise at a lower level but continue to produce shrinkage unless offset by sustained immigration.

Alongside demographic change, economic decline has become a central dimension of shrinkage. For much of the industrial period, economic growth was assumed as the normal condition, and planning practices were built around this expectation. In recent decades, however, many regions, particularly those shaped by **heavy industry have experienced prolonged economic contraction**. Manufacturing closures, job losses, and declining investment have left visible spatial traces of stagnation and underuse.

Economic shrinkage typically unfolds through three interrelated processes,
- **Deindustrialisation**, which leaves behind unused infrastructure and unemployment.
- **Disinvestment**, through the withdrawal of capital from older urban areas in favour of global hubs
- **Global polarisation**, which concentrates opportunities in a limited number of metropolitan regions while small and medium-sized cities lose relevance.

These processes do not follow uniform trajectories. **Some cities adapt through diversification, innovation, or cultural activities, while others remain locked into long-term decline.** At the same time, reduced industrial activity can create opportunities for more sustainable land use, ecological recovery, and alternative forms of economic resilience. In this sense, the erosion of automatic growth forces cities and regions to confront shrinkage as a structural condition and to explore more balanced development paths.

1.2 How Shrinkage Has Been Interpreted in Planning Theory

Urban shrinkage has become one of the central challenges of contemporary urbanism. For a long time, urban theory treated decline as an exception to the norm of growth. The concept of urban retraction helps shift this perspective, framing shrinkage as an alternative and often long-term pathway of urban development.

Early theoretical approaches, such as life-cycle models from the 1970s and 1980s, saw **decline as a final stage following suburban expansion**, a form of "counter-urbanization" (van den Berg et al., 1982). Political economy perspectives, by contrast, focused on uneven development, capital disinvestment, and shifts in labour and production structures as key engines of urban decline (Harvey, 1982; Smith, 1984). More recent contributions argue for integrative frameworks that see shrinkage not just as an outcome, but as a process rooted in historical, political, and governance dynamics (Haase et al., 2014). In this view, urban retraction is both a symptom of structural change and an active reconfiguration of the social and spatial fabric.

Philipp Oswalt and Tim Rieniets (2006), in their Atlas of Shrinking Cities, were among the first to frame shrinkage as a global phenomenon. They showed that demographic and economic decline appear not only in deindustrialised cities of Europe and North America, but also in post-socialist territories and other transition contexts. Their work underlines **that shrinkage is not an anomaly, but part of broader structural conditions linked to demographic shifts and global economic change.** By highlighting spatial, cultural, and social dimensions, they opened the debate toward rethinking how cities adapt when growth is no longer guaranteed.

Haase et al.(2014) expanded this discussion with a multidimensional approach that distinguishes demographic, economic, spatial, and social dimensions of shrinkage. Demographically, this involves ageing and out-migration. economically, the collapse or transformation of local employment bases, spatially, the production of vacancies and underused infrastructures; socially, processes of segregation and weakened cohesion. Their work suggests that **shrinkage is not merely a matter of "fewer people," but a deeper restructuring of urban and territorial life** that calls for new planning instruments and policy tools.

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In the United States, much of the debate has centred on practical strategies for post-industrial cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, and Buffalo. Justin Hollander (2011) introduced the idea of **"right-sizing",** which focuses on adapting the city's physical form and infrastructure to a smaller population instead of pursuing unrealistic growth. Karina Pallagst (2009) proposed the notion of **"smart decline"**, encouraging cities to accept shrinkage as a long-term condition and treat it as an opportunity to test new urban forms, green reuse projects, and community-based resilience strategies.

At a more structural level, Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, Fol, and Cunningham-Sabot (2012) connect shrinkage with post-growth urbanism. They argue that shrinking cities reflect a broader transformation of global urbanisation shaped by deindustrialisation, globalisation, and demographic change. In this framework, slow growth and decline are no longer seen as temporary crises but as part of **a new urban condition** in which cities must learn to operate within demographic and ecological limits.

Taken together, these approaches show that urban retraction is not just a sign of failure but a transformative condition. It pushes cities and territories to rethink governance, spatial form, and socio-economic resilience. From Oswalt and Rieniets' global mapping to Haase's multidimensional lens, from Hollander's rightsizing to Pallagst's smart decline and Martinez-Fernandez et al.'s post-growth perspective, there is a clear convergence: shrinkage is now recognised as a legitimate, if challenging, pathway of urban development. For planners, this means loosening the hold of growth-centred thinking and experimenting with new ways of shaping urban futures.

Urban shrinkage is driven by forces operating at multiple levels, from local to global. These include economic decline, demographic change, suburbanisation, urban sprawl, environmental disasters, and political or administrative shifts such as border changes (Couch et al., 2005; Kabisch et al., 2008; Nuissl and Rink, 2005; Großmann et al., 2008; Oswalt and Rieniets, 2006). Population loss remains the core indicator of shrinkage (Bradbury et al., 1982; Turok and Mykhnenko, 2007), but its effects are wide-ranging: it influences labour markets, housing, infrastructures, municipal finances, and the local economy (Couch and Cocks, 2011a; Fol, 2012; Mallach, 2012a). Direct consequences include vacant housing, underused utilities, falling tax revenues, and brownfield sites. Indirect effects arise through feedback loops, job loss leads to out-migration, which leads to abandonment, social marginalisation, and declining political attention.

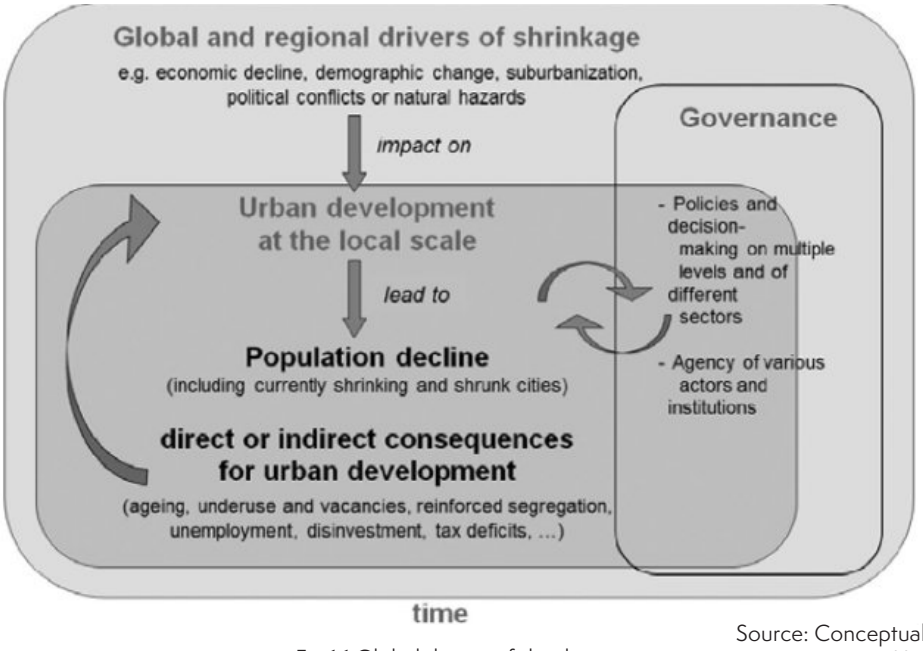


Fig 1.1 Global drivers of shrinkage

Source: Conceptualizing urban shrinkage
University of Birmingham

The trajectory of each shrinking city is also shaped by its governance context, relations between local, regional, national, and supranational levels, as well as tensions between public and private interests (Bernt et al., 2010; EC, 2011). Since shrinkage is dynamic, it must always be read in historical context (Beauregard, 2009).

A heuristic model of urban shrinkage can therefore be useful. Such a model brings together different approaches and links three main components, the drivers of shrinkage, their impacts, and the responses they generate. It is cross-contextual and pluralistic, based both on empirical research on European shrinking cities and on existing literature. Rather than promoting a single theory, it works as a flexible framework to describe key processes and to generate new questions and debates (Innes and Booher, 2010).

1.3 What European Cities Teach Us About Managing Decline

Germany and the Planning Paradigm Shift

Germany has been central in shaping the debate on shrinking cities. The notion of schrumpfende Städte entered discussions in the 1980s, but it gained real visibility after reunification. Eastern German cities like Leipzig and Halle experienced rapid population loss driven by deindustrialisation, unemployment, and out-migration. Between 1990 and 2000, some cities lost up to a quarter of their residents, resulting in vacant housing, oversized infrastructure, and fiscal crisis.

The policy response marked a significant shift in planning culture. Rather than continuing to plan for growth, national and local governments launched Stadtumbau Ost in 2001, a programme that openly acknowledged long-term decline. This included demolishing surplus housing, reallocating resources, improving remaining infrastructure, and transforming vacant land into green and open spaces. Cultural and ecological initiatives such as IBA Emscher Park in the Ruhr and Fürst-Pückler-Land in Lusatia helped frame shrinkage as an opportunity for ecological renewal and cultural reinvention (Hollander et al., 2009). This experience is often viewed as a turning point—the basis of a specific "German school" of shrinking cities (Pallagst, 2007; Hollander et al., 2009).

Eastern Europe and Post-Socialist Retraction

In Eastern Europe, shrinkage followed a different, more abrupt path. In countries like Ukraine, Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states, urban decline emerged from the collapse of socialist industries, rapid economic liberalisation, and mass emigration. Unlike the gradual deindustrialisation in parts of Western Europe, this took place as a form of "shock therapy," compressing decades of structural change into only a few years (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012). Form of "shock therapy," compressing decades of structural change into only a few years (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012).

Many cities experienced sudden factory closures, widespread brownfields, oversized housing estates, and severe fiscal stress. Declining fertility and youth out-migration intensified demographic loss. These cases highlight the importance of context: post-socialist shrinkage cannot be explained solely by economic restructuring but must also consider governance transitions, new borders, and the breakdown of former welfare systems (Steinführer and Haase, 2007).

Globalisation and the Spread of Shrinkage

Shrinkage is not limited to Europe. The Shrinking Cities International Research Network (SCIRN) has identified more than 450 cities worldwide with over 100,000 inhabitants that have lost more than 10% of their population since the mid-20th century (Hollander et al., 2009). This includes cases in North America, Japan, and Latin America. Globalisation underpins many of these dynamics. While global cities like London, New York, and Tokyo attract capital and skilled labour, other regions are left behind.

Martinez-Fernandez et al. (2012) speak of a **"shrinkage identity,"** where similar symptoms, vacant land, fiscal stress, ageing population, emerge across different contexts. Global production networks concentrate opportunities in some regions while draining others, leaving many former industrial cities without a clear role in the global economy.

Rethinking Shrinkage in Planning Practice

Recognising shrinkage as a long-term condition has deep implications for planning. For decades, planning practice largely ignored or denied decline. Today, more cities are experimenting with strategies that accept shrinkage and try to work with it rather than against it.

Examples include green reuse of vacant land, temporary uses, ecological restoration, and cultural regeneration projects. In the United States, the "Youngstown 2010" plan became emblematic for openly accepting long-term decline and transforming vacant land into parks and community spaces. In Europe, similar strategies aim to create more compact, sustainable, and liveable cities (Hollander et al., 2009).

Overall, the European and international experience shows that shrinking cities are not isolated anomalies but part of a wider transformation of urban systems. Understanding their trajectories requires cross-contextual frameworks that connect theory, empirical evidence, and planning practice. In this perspective, shrinkage can move from being seen purely as crisis to being treated as a catalyst for rethinking urban futures.





Chapter II

Shrinkage and Heritage in Italy: Processes and Geographies

2.1 Shrinkage and Heritage in the Italian Urban System

In Italy, the effects of shrinkage are deeply intertwined with the country's territorial structure and its long-standing relationship with heritage. While demographic decline is often associated with remote inner areas or small villages, many medium-sized towns experience similar processes in less visible ways. Historic centres, in particular, retain strong symbolic and architectural value while gradually losing residents, services, and everyday functions. Planning frameworks tend to oscillate between conservation driven protection and growth-oriented regeneration, leaving little room for strategies that acknowledge long-term contraction. Within this context, an intermediate territorial condition emerges, neither metropolitan nor marginal, where shrinkage unfolds slowly and unevenly, yet remains largely unrecognised as a structural planning issue.

Urban shrinkage is a multilayered phenomenon that challenges conventional methods of urban development, which are still largely predicated on growth, expansion, and modernization. Rather than being pointing out the population loss or economic collapse, shrinkage is better understood as a chronic, spatially uneven, and often subtle process of retraction. It includes demographic decline, reduction in economic activity, abandonment of infrastructure, and weakening of institutional presence all of which collectively reshape the physical and symbolic urban landscape.

In Italy, where urban form and identity are historically and morphologically rooted in centuries-old patterns of settlement, shrinkage takes on an especially symbolic and spatial resonance, when cities shrink, they not only lose people or functions, but they also risk losing meaning and purpose. *Streets, piazzas, and palazzi* may remain intact, but their vitality disappears. This condition of spatial presence without social activation is central to understanding the qualitative dimension of urban retraction.

Therefore, the conceptualization of shrinking cities must go beyond quantitative thresholds (e.g., population decline of 10% over a decade) to include indicators of socio-symbolic erosion, such as closure of public institutions, disconnection from governance networks, and deteriorating relational infrastructures. This broader understanding allows for a more nuanced engagement with the realities of shrinking territories, especially in historically dense and morphologically fragile contexts like those in Inner parts of Italy.

In many territories, this process does not manifest as abrupt collapse but as gradual fading where institutions dissolve, traditions weaken, and public space empties of collective life. These are not failed cities, but rather spaces that have transitioned out of dominant networks of meaning and utility. Their challenge lies in the reactivation of spatial and social significance.

Heritage, Identity, and Urban Resilience in Shrinking Territories in Italy

In context with urban retraction, all the key adaptive methods play an intersecting role with one another. Some of the main concepts includes,

- **Urban Resilience:** In shrinking cities, resilience is not about resisting change or returning to past states, it is about the capacity to reinterpret, reuse, and reimagine what already exists. It is the ability to transform symbolic and spatial remnants intomeaningful resources for for a new civic and economic life.

- **Heritage Conservation:** Heritage conservation becomes a crucial tool in this process, but only if it moves beyond passive preservation, the built environment of shrinking territories should be understood not only as a burden of maintenance but as a latent structure of opportunity.

- **Adaptive Reuse:** Adaptive reuse, whether of empty schools, abandoned convents, or industrial ruins, offers pathways for reconnecting past and present. These interventions must be interpretive acts that restore not just function, but narrative continuity.

This approach also aligns with broader European and Italian policy shifts, which emphasize sustainability, digital innovation, and cultural infrastructure. However, implementation remains uneven, and the integrative potential of heritage-led regeneration is still underutilized in shrinking territories.

Research Gaps: Borders, Shrinkage, and Heritage

When we talk about borders and boundaries in shrinking cities, it is not just about physical limits but about a shift in meaning, where life and activity slowly fade, leaving behind places that are still standing yet disconnected from everyday use. In Italy, this becomes very visible in historic centres. These towns and cities, once full of civic energy and collective identity, often keep their architectural fabric intact, but their vitality drains away. The piazzas, streets, and palazzi are there, but they risk turning into silent backdrops instead of living spaces. This raises an important question: **how do we sustain heritage when the community that gives it meaning is shrinking?**

Looking at this more closely, a few gaps become clear:

- **Scale of analysis:** Most research in Italy looks at shrinkage on a broad scale, regional or national population decline, economic loss, or migration numbers. What is often missing is how shrinkage actually plays out inside the city: how the historic centre behaves differently from the newer peripheries, or how the boundary between lived and abandoned spaces keeps shifting.
- **Heritage as static vs. active:** Too often, heritage is treated as something to protect for its own sake, or as a resource for tourism. What is less explored is how heritage can actively help communities reframe their future, how it can move from being a weight of the past to a tool for resilience.
- **Everyday life and symbolism:** Many studies stop at numbers, population decline, empty housing, job loss. But what about the softer dimensions of shrinkage, like when schools close, festivals stop happening, or piazzas

are no longer used as meeting places? This everyday erosion of meaning in public space is underexplored.
- **Policy and practice disconnect:** There is still a gap between national visions and local realities, especially in inner territories where heritage and decline meet most directly.

2.2 Historic Centres as Fragile Urban Cores

Defining the Historic City Centre

The historic city centres, the part often still marked by its medieval walls or by Renaissance layouts, where the main institutions, markets, churches, and public spaces were once concentrated. It is the most layered part of the city, where centuries of urban life have accumulated and left visible traces in streets, piazzas, and buildings. In Italy, this **central core is not just a collection of monuments: it has always represented the heart of collective life, a place that defines the identity of the town itself** (Micelli & Pellegrini, 2018; Pellegrini, 2019).These areas are not just spatial units but repositories of collective identity, where the long durée of urban development becomes visible in the form of the palimpsest.

Italian planning culture has long reinforced this view. From the Gubbio Charter in the 1960s to the reflections of Rogers and Rossi, the historic centre has been understood as a continuous cultural landscape, something to be preserved, yes, but also something to be lived in and adapted. Rossi, for example, insisted that the form of the city is always the product of continuity between past and present, while Rogers stressed responsibility towards preesistenze ambientali as part of modern design (Pezzetti, n.d.). Later, UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape Recommendation (2011) echoed this same principle: that heritage must remain part of living urban systems (D'Amico & Currà, 2018).

Thus, the historic centre does more than preserve the past, **it defines the image of the town itself, it is the symbolic and emotional core of the town.** It is what people identify with, what tourists photograph, what communities hold in memory.

In shrinking cities, this symbolic weight becomes even stronger, because when a town begins to lose population and functions, what remains most visible of its value is its historic centre (Lucchi, 2025).

Shrinkage and the Abandonment of Historic Centres

And yet, the reality on the ground shows a worrying paradox. Many Italian historic centres are being slowly abandoned. Studies demonstrate that housing vacancy in northern **Italian centres rose from around 19% in 1991 to over 30% by 2011, while the number of public institutions present in those same areas declined by more than 70%** (Micelli & Pellegrini, 2018). Families increasingly choose newer suburban areas where accessibility, parking, and housing costs are easier to manage. Businesses and services, too, have followed, migrating to new commercial zones. The centre, once the most active part of the city, is now often the quietest (Pellegrini, 2019).

This abandonment manifests as both demographic shrinkage and economic restructuring. Families relocate to suburban or peri-urban areas with better accessibility and affordability, while businesses and services migrate to new commercial zones (Marra, 2024). The centre becomes less attractive for residents and firms, leading to an urban paradox:

the most protected and celebrated parts of the city are also those most underutilised (Pellegrini, 2019). Caselli *et al.* (2020) show that this shrinkage is not random but spatially clustered, with historic cores often functioning as shrinking clusters in wider territorial dynamics. In shrinking cities, therefore, the historic centre becomes the most visible site of contraction, a fragile epicentre of demographic and functional decline.

Urban Decay of the Historic Fabric

The decay of the historic centre today is not always a matter of collapsing buildings. Many have been restored over the last decades. **Decay is no longer primarily physical but functional.** What we often see instead is a kind of "silent decay": houses that are structurally sound but stand vacant, shops with shutters permanently down, and public spaces that have lost their everyday users. The urban fabric is intact but hollow. (Micelli & Pellegrini, 2018).

This fragility is amplified by social shifts. Ageing populations dominate many centres, while younger families move out. In some towns, vacant housing is filled by lower-income or migrant households, changing the social composition without necessarily bringing economic revitalisation (Pellegrini, 2019). At the same time, the withdrawal of schools, hospitals, and local administrations has stripped the centres of their former functions (Micelli & Pellegrini, 2018). D'Amico and Currà (2018) describe this as a challenge of urban resilience: how to maintain vitality in places where both people and institutions are retreating.

The Importance of Preserving this Core

Despite these fragilities, historic centres remain too important to ignore. They are the clearest expression of a town's identity and the anchor of its cultural capital. Lucchi (2025) shows how heritage-driven regeneration projects in small Italian towns have successfully mobilised historic centres as platforms for revival. Dell'Ovo (2023) argues that *cultural heritage, when supported by the right decision-making tools, can drive sustainable development in inner areas*. Evenfrom an environmental perspective, centres offer opportunities: reusing vacant buildings reduces land consumption and aligns with contemporary ideas of circular economies (Marra, 2024; Pellegrini, 2019). From Pezzetti (n.d.) words, the point is not to treat these places as frozen museums, but as living, adaptive landscapes. Their fragility, in fact, is what makes them so important. Because they sit at the crossroads of decline and identity, they reveal both the vulnerabilities of shrinking cities and their greatest potential for renewal.

The Historic Centre as Fragile Core

In summary, to call the historic centre the fragile core of shrinking cities is to recognise this paradox. Fragile, because demographic decline, abandonment, and institutional retreat undermine its social and economic functions. Core, because it still concentrates the symbols, memories, and meanings that define the city. In contexts of shrinkage, **the centre becomes both the most visible site of decline and the most powerful resource for imagining a sustainable future**. Preserving and reactivating it is not just about safeguarding heritage; it is about giving the town itself a reason to remain relevant.

2.3 Patterns of Territorial Decline in Italy

In Italy, urban shrinkage is not an isolated episode but part of a broader and recurring trajectory of territorial transformation. Unlike Eastern Europe, where shrinkage is closely tied to post-socialist transitions, or Northern Europe, where it often follows industrial decline, the Italian case is shaped by a combination of long-standing demographic imbalances, persistent regional disparities, and fragmented governance (Camarda, Rotondo & Selicato, 2014).

Shrinkage as a Structural Condition

Italian cities show how shrinkage has become almost a structural condition rather than a temporary anomaly. Depopulation affects many inner and intermediate areas, especially small and medium-sized towns in central and southern regions, where out-migration, ageing, and low fertility create enduring demographic fragility. At the same time, large metropolitan areas experience shrinkage within their historic cores, where residents are displaced by tourism, services, or affluent groups, while younger households move toward cheaper peri-urban areas (Gemmiti et al., 2014). Shrinkage and sprawl therefore coexist within the same territories.

Demographic and Economic Transitions

Economic restructuring has reinforced these demographic trends. The decline of major industrial hubs such as Taranto, Genoa, or Turin shows how deindustrialisation can erode employment bases, increase unemployment, and deepen social and environmental problems (Camarda et al., 2014). Unlike contexts where strong national programmes were developed (as in Germany), Italian responses have often been fragmented, with an emphasis on physical regeneration and flagship projects rather than on structural socio-economic issues. In some cases, this has fuelled gentrification in historic centres while leaving vulnerable populations and declining areas unaddressed.

Recent studies confirm the scale of the phenomenon. Between 2011 and 2018, more than twenty large Italian cities,including Naples, Palermo, Venice, Bari, and Taranto, recorded losses in both population and employment, fitting common definitions of shrinking cities (Della Lucia, Segre & Vitali, 2021). Others, such as Rome or Milan, continued to grow demographically but faced deindustrialisation and spatial inequalities, showing that shrinkage is not limited to "failing" cities but affects the entire urban system in different ways.

Governance and Policy Challenges

A key feature of the Italian case is the difficulty institutions have in recognising shrinkage as a legitimate and long-term condition. Planning remains largely oriented toward growth, investing in infrastructure and urban "hardware" while often neglecting social integration, welfare, and long-term sustainability (Camarda et al., 2014). Fragmented governance between municipalities, regions, and the national level further complicates coordinated responses. This stands in contrast with international experiences that treat shrinkage as an opportunity to test new planning and policy tools.

Culture, Heritage, and Creativity as Resources

In recent years, however, there has been growing interest in culture, heritage, and creativity as possible drivers of regeneration. Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs), tourism, and heritage-based strategies have been explored in several cities as ways to reuse abandoned spaces,

strengthen identity, and activate new forms of local economies (Della Lucia & Segre, 2017). While these initiatives cannot reverse demographic decline, they show how cultural assets can be mobilised to support resilience and open new trajectories for shrinking cities.

Distinctive Traits of the Italian Paradigm

The Italian paradigm of shrinkage can be summarised through a few key traits:

- a multi-scalar nature, affecting both large metropolitan cores and smaller intermediate towns.
- the coexistence of shrinkage and sprawl within the same territories.
- persistent regional divides, with southern cities facing chronic out-migration and northern ones dealing with industrial transitions.
- fragmented governance and slow adaptation of planning tools.
- a growing reliance on cultural and heritage assets as compensatory strategies for resilience.

In this sense, shrinkage in Italy should not be understood only as a demographic or economic problem, but as a broader territorial paradigm. It reflects uneven modernisation, the reconfiguration of Italia di Mezzo and other intermediate territories, and the ongoing search for new, more sustainable forms of urbanity.

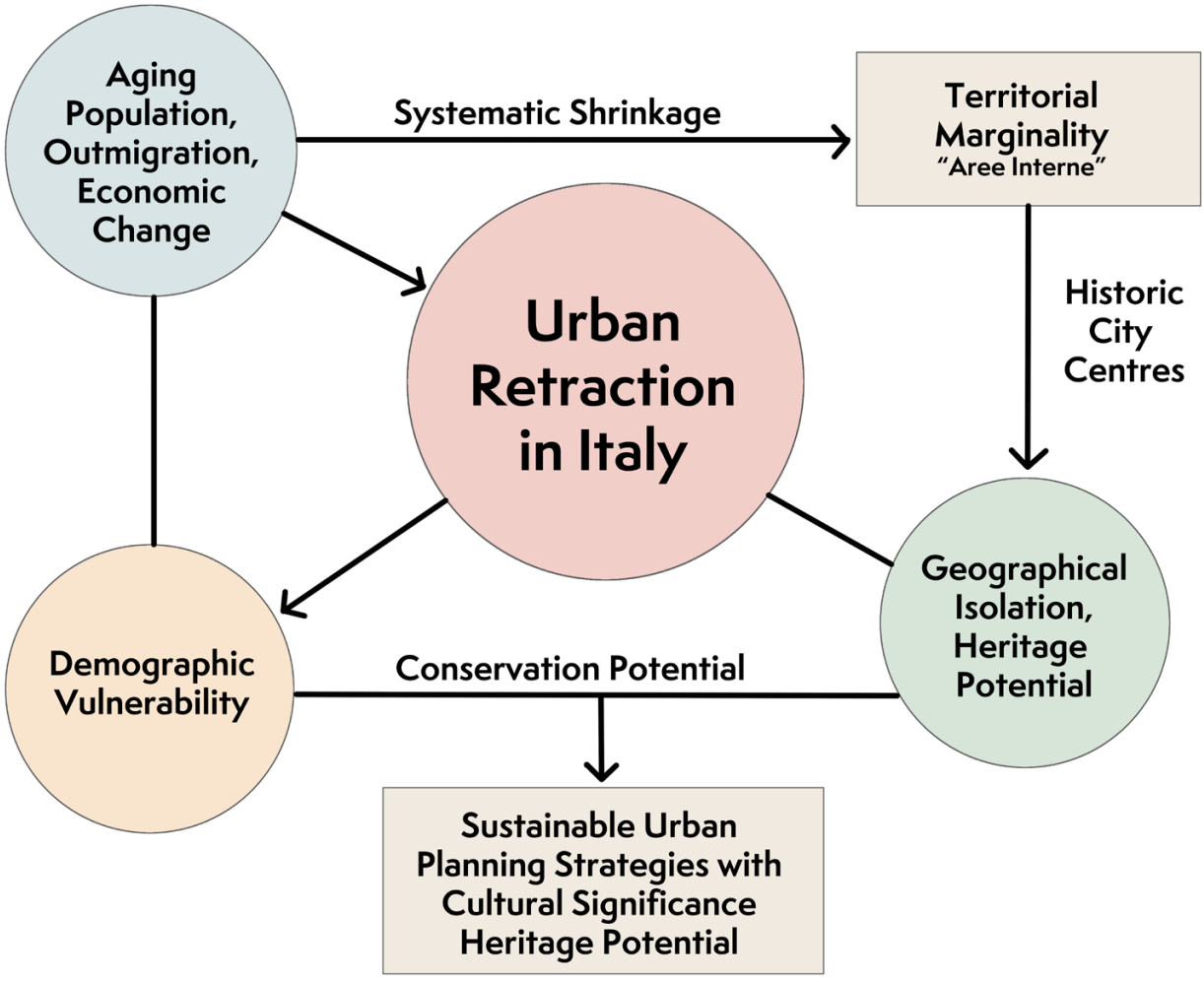
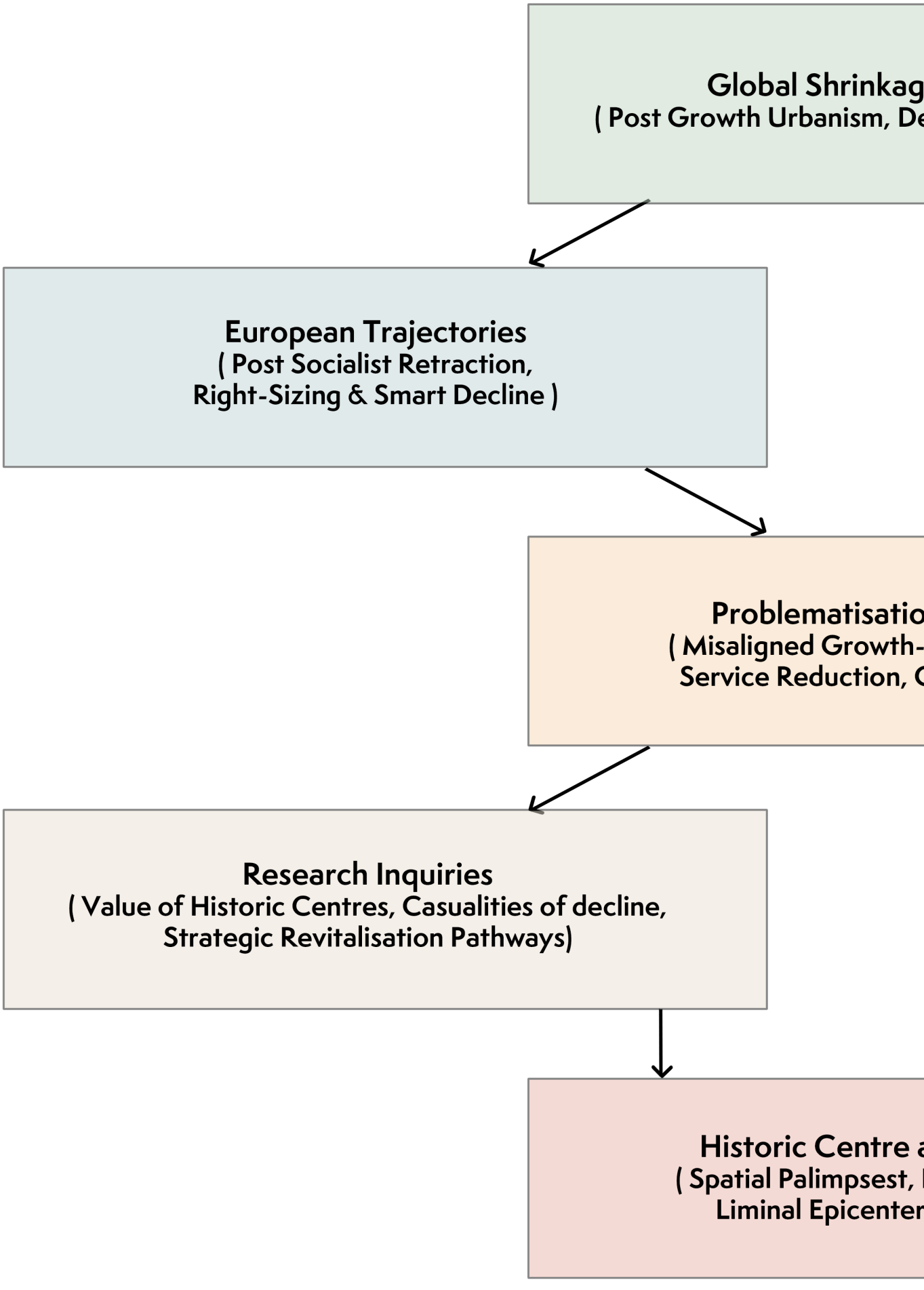


Fig 2.1 Pattern for Urban Retraction in Italy


Global Shrinkag
(Post Growth Urbanism, De
European Trajectories
(Post Socialist Retraction,
Right-Sizing & Smart Decline)
Problematisatio
(Misaligned Growth-
Service Reduction, C
Research Inquiries
(Value of Historic Centres, Casualities of decline,
Strategic Revitalisation Pathways)
Historic Centre a
(Spatial Palimpsest,
Liminal Epicenter

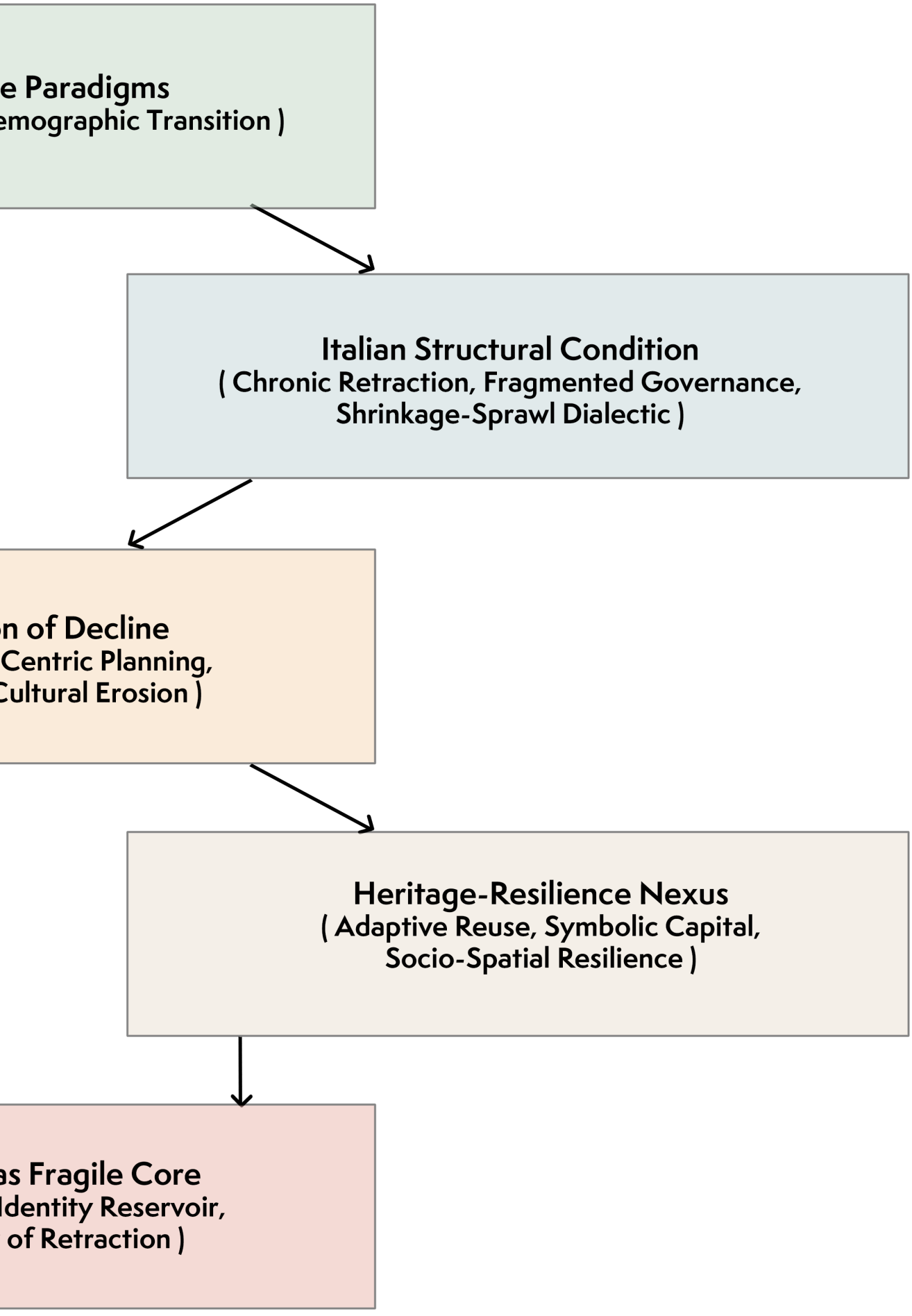


Fig 2.2 Interconnected Pathways of Shrinkage and Heritage
From Paradigms to Fragile Cores

2.4 How Shrinkage Operates Across Scales

I.Metropolitan Areas

These include Italy's major cities and their surrounding hinterlands. They are densely populated, well-connected, and economically vibrant, acting as engines of growth and innovation. Yet, they also face challenges like congestion, social inequalities, and environmental pressures.

II.Intermediate Areas ("Italia di Mezzo")

The intermediate areas sit between metropolitan hubs and internal peripheries. They are neither fully urban nor completely isolated, usually made up of medium-sized towns, peri-urban settlements, and semi-rural landscapes. In fact, they cover most of Italy's territory and play a vital role in balancing urban growth and rural decline, connecting different regions and sustaining local economies.

III.Internal Areas ("Aree Interne")

Often remote, mountainous, or rural, internal areas struggle with depopulation, aging populations, and limited access to services. While these regions face economic and infrastructural challenges, they are also rich in cultural heritage and natural landscapes, offering potential for sustainable, locally tailored development strategies.

Source: Italia di mezzo: The emerging marginality of intermediate territories



Fig 2.3 Urban Hierarchy

Effects of Shrinkage

Local scale: everyday signs

At the local scale, shrinkage often appears quietly, through everyday changes rather than dramatic collapses. In a medium-sized town, young people leave for larger cities, leaving behind an ageing population. Schools merge or close, shops reduce their opening hours or disappear, services become thinner, and housing stands empty. These shifts accumulate slowly, weakening the economic and social fabric over time (Lanzani & Renzoni, 2023).

Oswalt and Rieniets (2006) remind us that these small symptoms, an empty school, a closed factory, an abandoned infrastructure, are part of a wider global map of urban shrinkage. In Italy, what stands out is that this does not happen only in classic industrial cities or post-socialist regions, but also in ordinary territories, including countryside towns and the "in-between" spaces of Intermediate Italy.

Regional scale: polarised patterns

At the regional scale, the picture is more polarised. Metropolitan areas such as Milan and Rome continue to attract investment, infrastructures, and innovation. Inland and mountain areas, by contrast, have been officially recognised as fragile through the Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne (SNAI), where marginality is defined by distance from essential services such as hospitals, schools, and railway stations. These territories have rightly received attention as places at risk of depopulation and economic stagnation (Curci et al., 2023).

This creates a familiar geography: the metropolis as the engine of growth and the inner areas as fragile but visible in policy debates. Between these two poles lies a less recognised reality, Middle Italy.

The "missing middle"

Between the global city and the remote village lies the Italia di mezzo. **More than half of Italy's population and surface belong to this "middle" geography of medium-sized cities,** dispersed urbanisation, plains, and valley floors. And yet, these spaces are rarely at the centre of national debates or policy agendas (Lanzani & Renzoni, 2023).

From a scalar perspective, Middle Italy acts as a hinge. It supports fragile inner areas by providing services, infrastructures, and jobs, and at the same time relieves congested metropolitan centres by offering more liveable and accessible conditions. As Oswalt & Rieniets (2006) suggest, shrinking cities must always be read within broader networks rather than as isolated points. This is particularly true in Middle Italy, where local decline often mirrors larger regional transformations. Ignoring these "in-between" spaces means losing sight of how shrinkage and resilience are linked across scales (Curci et al., 2023; Lanzani & Renzoni, 2023).

Multi-scalar reading as a planning tool

Thinking about shrinkage only at one level risks misleading solutions. A local loss of residents may be the outcome of regional industrial restructuring, the transformation of agriculture, or national demographic trends. A multi-scalar perspective is therefore essential in the Italian context. It allows us to connect everyday decline in a single municipality to wider processes like global competition, climate vulnerability, or changes in welfare systems.

A multi-scalar reading does not treat shrinkage as either a minor local issue or an abstract national trend, but as a complex phenomenon unfolding across connected territorial scales (Lanzani & Renzoni, 2023; Oswalt & Rieniets, 2006). A local decline in population might reflect broader regional shifts, such as the restructuring of industry or demographic aging across entire macro-regions. It allows us to connect everyday decline in a municipality to larger processes like globalization, agricultural change, or climate vulnerability. Without this layered reading, shrinkage risks being seen as either a minor local issue or an abstract national trend, instead of the complex phenomenon it really is.

In Italy, this means not only looking at booming metropolises or struggling inner areas, but also at the "in-between" spaces where much of the country's life is living. (Lanzani & Renzoni, 2023; Oswalt & Rieniets, 2006).

Intermediate Geographies & Spatial Marginality

Beyond the centre:periphery binary

Italian territorial debates often remain stuck in a binary frame. On one side, metropolitan city are cast as hubs of innovation, connectivity, and competitiveness. On the other, inner areas are framed as fragile spaces, sometimes romanticised as authentic landscapes of heritage and potential re-inhabitation. This dual narrative has shaped both research and policy, but it leaves a large part of the country in the shadows (Lanzani & Renzoni, 2023).

Why Middle Italy is overlooked

Several reasons help explain this neglect (Lanzani & Renzoni, 2023):

- **Symbolic weakness :** Middle Italy lacks the glamour of the global metropolis and the nostalgic charm of the remote village.
- **Policy blind spots :** Strategies are often designed either to boost metropolitan competitiveness or to revitalise inner areas, leaving the middle layer without tailored tools.
- **Heterogeneity :** Middle Italy is extremely diverse, ranging from logistics platforms and industrial districts to low-density agricultural landscapes. This makes it difficult to capture in a single narrative or policy category.

Because of this, Middle Italy remains "ordinary but strategic": important for national functioning, but rarely treated as a priority.



Fig 2.4 Complete Abandonment in a small village in the outskirts of Vercelli

Source: Author's Photography, Site visit Larizzate, Vercelli, 2025

Resilience and fragility in the in-between

Despite being overlooked, Middle Italy plays a central role in Italy's resilience. It acts as a hinge between cities and rural areas, concentrates infrastructures, and holds strong social and institutional capital. Historically, it has helped absorb crises and redistribute population flows. At the same time, it faces its own vulnerabilities: demographic ageing, land consumption, industrial decline, and ecological pressures linked to intensive agriculture and logistics (Curci et al., 2023).

This "in-betweenness" means that Middle Italy is both resilient and fragile. It has resources to adapt, but also faces slow, cumulative forms of downgrade.

Towards a third category in urban hierarchies

Recognising Middle Italy as a third category beyond the simple centre-periphery divide is essential. These territories show that decline is not limited to remote villages, it is also present in everyday landscapes and ordinary towns. Giving them visibility changes how we understand shrinkage and where we locate it.

For planners and policymakers, this means building strategies that acknowledge the specific role of Middle Italy: strengthening its communities, valuing its heritage, and preparing it for ecological and social transitions, rather than assuming it will naturally adjust on its own (Lanzani & Renzoni, 2023).

Structural Drivers & Territorial Consequences

Urban shrinkage is driven by a combination of factors that operate across global, national, regional, and local scales. At the macro level, demographic transitions such as ageing populations and declining birth rates are reshaping the basic structure of societies. Italy, with one of the world's lowest fertility rates, is particularly exposed to these trends. At the same time, post-Fordist economic restructuring has led to the collapse or transformation of traditional industrial sectors and the concentration of opportunities in a limited number of global and national urban hubs.

At the national and regional scales, Italy shows long-standing territorial disparities. The north-south divide is well documented, but today it is mirrored by internal centre-periphery divides within regions. **Many small and medium sized towns in inland and intermediate areas experience "selective shrinkage"**, younger and more educated residents leave, while older populations remain, infrastructures are underused, and real estate becomes dormant. The mountainous or orographically complex nature of many of these towns further reduces accessibility and makes reinvestment less attractive.

At the local level, these structural forces become visible in concrete ways like **schools and post offices close, shops shut down, religious and civic festivals are reduced or disappear, and housing remains vacant or semi-occupied**. Beyond physical and functional effects, shrinkage also produces a perceptual shift. Residents start to see their town as a place of loss rather than of possibility. This "disoriented perspective" erodes the shared narratives that once held communities together.

This combination of structural drivers and everyday consequences can produce what might be described as a 'semantic vacuum', in which **towns persist physically but lose their shared meanings and contemporary social relevance**. Towns risk becoming spatial containers that are no longer fully connected to contemporary social practices. This is not only a planning or economic issue, but also a cultural and existential one: what happens when the forms of the city persist, but their meanings become uncertain? Towns become spatial containers disconnected from contemporary social practices. This is not simply a planning problem, but a cultural and existential one.

The built environment, whether industrial ruins, medieval streets, or terraced landscapes, can thus be read as a latent structure waiting to be reactivated. Adaptive reuse strategies breathe new life into underused assets, linking past forms to new socio-economic fabrics.

In summary, the convergence of resilience, conservation, and reuse offers a foundation for recalibrating planning in shrinking cities. It calls for planners, architects, and policymakers to act as cultural mediators, capable of translating the latent potential of the past into durable futures. Stitching past forms into new socio-economic fabrics. This aligns with European initiatives like the New European Bauhaus and Italy's PNRR, which emphasize cultural infrastructure as a pillar of resilient development.

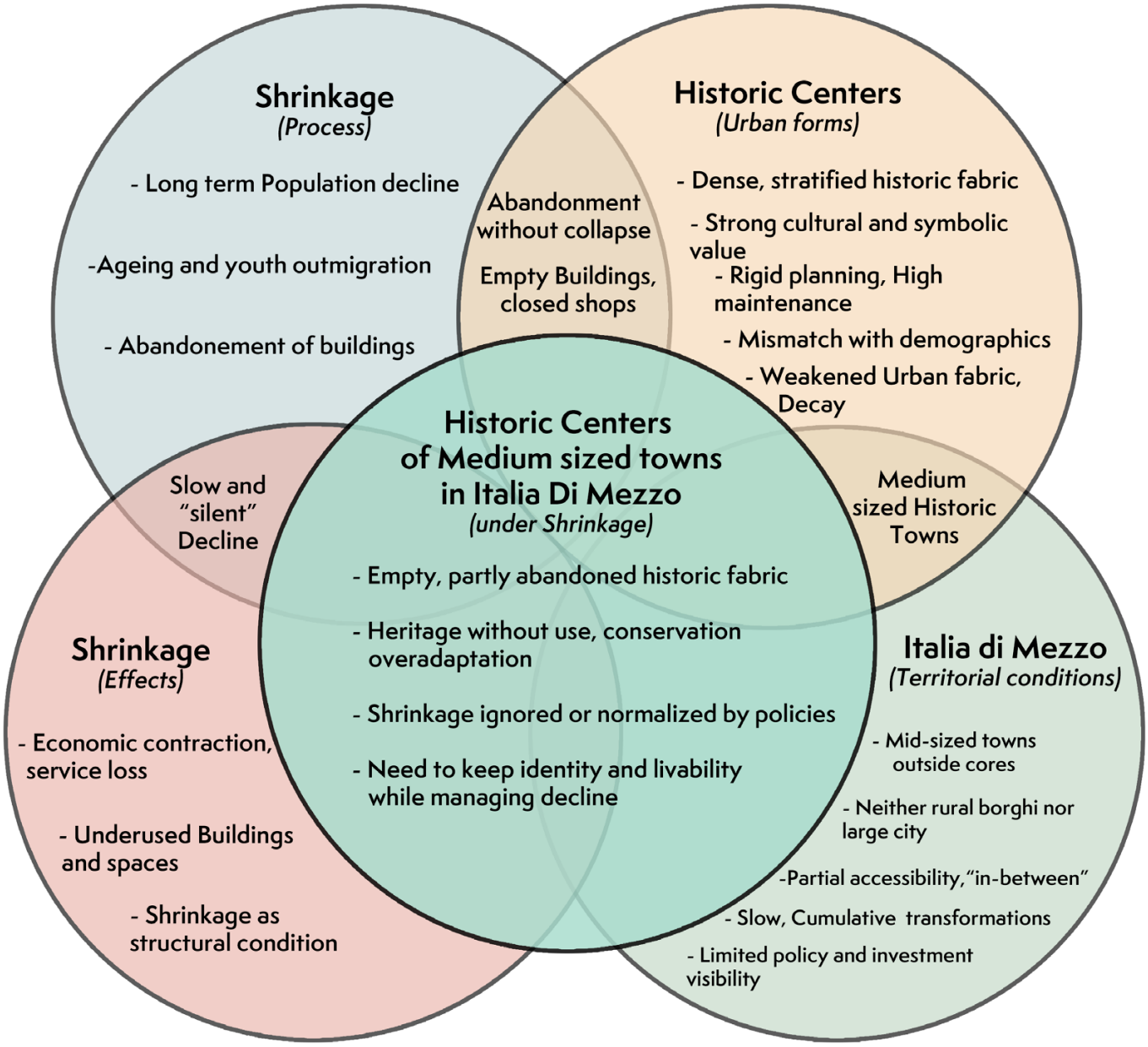


Fig 2.5 Conceptual Links

Governance in Italy's Intermediate & Inner Areas

Why governance outside the metropolitan areas is different

Non-metropolitan Italy is shaped by slow demographic loss, economic restructuring, and scattered settlement patterns. These conditions produce governance challenges that are quite different from those in large cities. In Italy, this unevenness is visible both in remote inner areas and in the "middle" territories of medium-sized cities, dispersed urbanisation, and agricultural-industrial belts. **Governing these places requires long-term coordination more than isolated flagship projects** (Hollander et al., 2009).

Fragmented capacity and fuzzy geographies

Outside metropolitan areas, many municipalities are small and under-resourced. They face shrinking tax bases, ageing staff, and limited technical capacity. At the same time, everyday life does not respect municipal boundaries, housing markets, commuting patterns, services, and logistics operate on wider functional scales. This mismatch, small institutional units versus large lived geographies, weakens planning and service provision (Haase *et al.,* 2014; Bernt et al., 2010).

Policy blind spots beyond the centre-periphery binary

Many policies still target two extremes,enhancing metropolitan competitiveness or rescuing remote inner areas. The ordinary but strategic "in-between" spaces, medium towns, coastal and valley belts, district-based economies, often fall between these categories. Yet these are exactly the territories where industrial restructuring, logistics expansion, and low-density sprawl have left complex legacies, vacant stock, over scaled infrastructures, fragile SMEs, and pressure on soil and water (Oswalt & Rieniets, 2006; Crisci et al., 2014). **Without tailored programmes, these areas risk slow downgrading rather than managed transition** (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012).

Who gets attention and who does not

Since the 2000s, the SNAI has rightly recognised inner areas as fragile and has mobilised targeted programmes. Metropolitan cities, in parallel, have been the focus of competitiveness and innovation strategies. Middle Italy, the ordinary but strategic space of medium-sized cities, dispersed towns, and industrial-agricultural belts, has largely remained invisible. This selective attention produces policy gaps: some territories are over-targeted (metros, remote villages), while others, despite hosting around half of Italy's population, receive little specific support (Curci et al., 2023; Lanzani & Renzoni, 2023).

Similar patterns appear in other shrinking contexts. Hollander et al. (2009) note *that many cities adopt "denial strategies", clinging to growth models instead of adapting to decline. In Italy, this often translates into scattered incentives or symbolic projects that do not address structural demographic contraction* (Bernt et al., 2010).

Coordination problems across scales

Even where policies exist, coordination is often weak. Small municipalities attempt to face shrinkage alone, but housing markets, service areas, and transport systems extend across wider territories. This leads to duplication of services, competition for limited fiscal resources, and fragmented planning (Haase et al., 2014).

At the intermediate level, provinces once played a bridging role but have been significantly weakened, **creating a governance vacuum**. Regions have the capacity to design broader strategies, but they often lack tools and structures for continuous engagement with dispersed localities (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012). Frequently, coordination emerges only in response to crises, industrial closures, floods, sudden depopulation, rather than as part of everyday planning (Oswalt & Rieniets, 2006).
Policy gaps in practice

These governance issues translate into concrete gaps:

- **Infrastructure and services:** Investment tends to concentrate on metropolitan transport and digital networks, while rural and middle territories remain under-connected, deepening inequalities in access to schools, healthcare, and employment (Crisci et al., 2014).
- **Economic strategies:** Industrial and innovation policies often prioritise global competitiveness, overlooking smaller districts and logistics belts facing their own restructuring pressures (Camarda et al., 2014).
- **Cultural and creative industries (CCI):** While CCI are promoted as tools for regeneration, in practice they are mostly concentrated in large Italian cities. Smaller places struggle to mobilise heritage and creativity for local benefit (Della Lucia & Segre, 2017; Della Lucia et al., 2021).

The cost of inaction

If these gaps and coordination failures are not addressed, non-metropolitan areas risk long term downgrading. They remain stuck in what Bernt et al. (2010) describe as the "limits of shrinkage", **aware of decline but unable to act proactively, because they lack the resources and governance frameworks to do so**. The result is uneven development, where metropolitan centres continue to absorb investment and talent, while the rest of the country is left to manage shrinkage largely on its own.

2.5 Why Growth-Based Regeneration Falls Short

National Strategies for Cultural and Territorial Regeneration:

PNRR and the Borghi Program

National strategies play a crucial role in addressing the challenges of urban shrinkage and depopulation in Italy. Among these, the Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (PNRR) stands out as a key policy framework, aligning national recovery objectives with the European NextGenerationEU plan. The PNRR emphasizes resilience, sustainability, and cultural regeneration, providing a strategic response to the socio-economic decline of historic towns and inner areas (aree interne).

The Borghi Plan

A significant component of the PNRR is the "Attrattività dei Borghi" program, which selects and invests in pilot historic villages and smaller settlements. Villages are chosen based on cultural and architectural heritage significance, demographic vulnerability, potential for tourism and economic revitalization, and capacity for community engagement. These interventions are designed to revitalize cultural heritage, stimulate local economies, and strengthen social cohesion, recognizing the potential of small towns as sites of identity, tourism, and sustainable growth.

- **Cultural restoration -** renovation of historic buildings, monuments, and public spaces to reinforce local identity and attract visitors.
- **Economic enhancement-** support for small businesses, local crafts, and tourism-related activities to create employment and counter depopulation.
- **Infrastructure and connectivity-** investments in digital infrastructure, mobility, and public services to make small towns more livable and attractive.
- **Community engagement -** projects fostering local participation, cultural programming, and civic involvement to strengthen social ties.

This PNRR plan reflects a national-level shift toward integrated, multi-scalar strategies, **linking cultural preservation with economic revitalization and demographic stabilization**. In regions of Middle Italy, where many historic cities face population decline, these strategies provide critical support for balancing heritage conservation with modern urban needs. By intervening at the intersection of culture, economy, and infrastructure, national programs like the PNRR offer a framework for transforming shrinking territories into resilient and attractive urban systems.

By linking heritage preservation with social and economic development, the Borghi Plan provides a national framework to support shrinking towns, turning them into resilient, attractive, and sustainable places. In regions like Middle Italy, where depopulation and urban shrinkage are pronounced, the program offers a model for combining cultural identity with modern development strategies, demonstrating how small villages can contribute to regional regeneration.

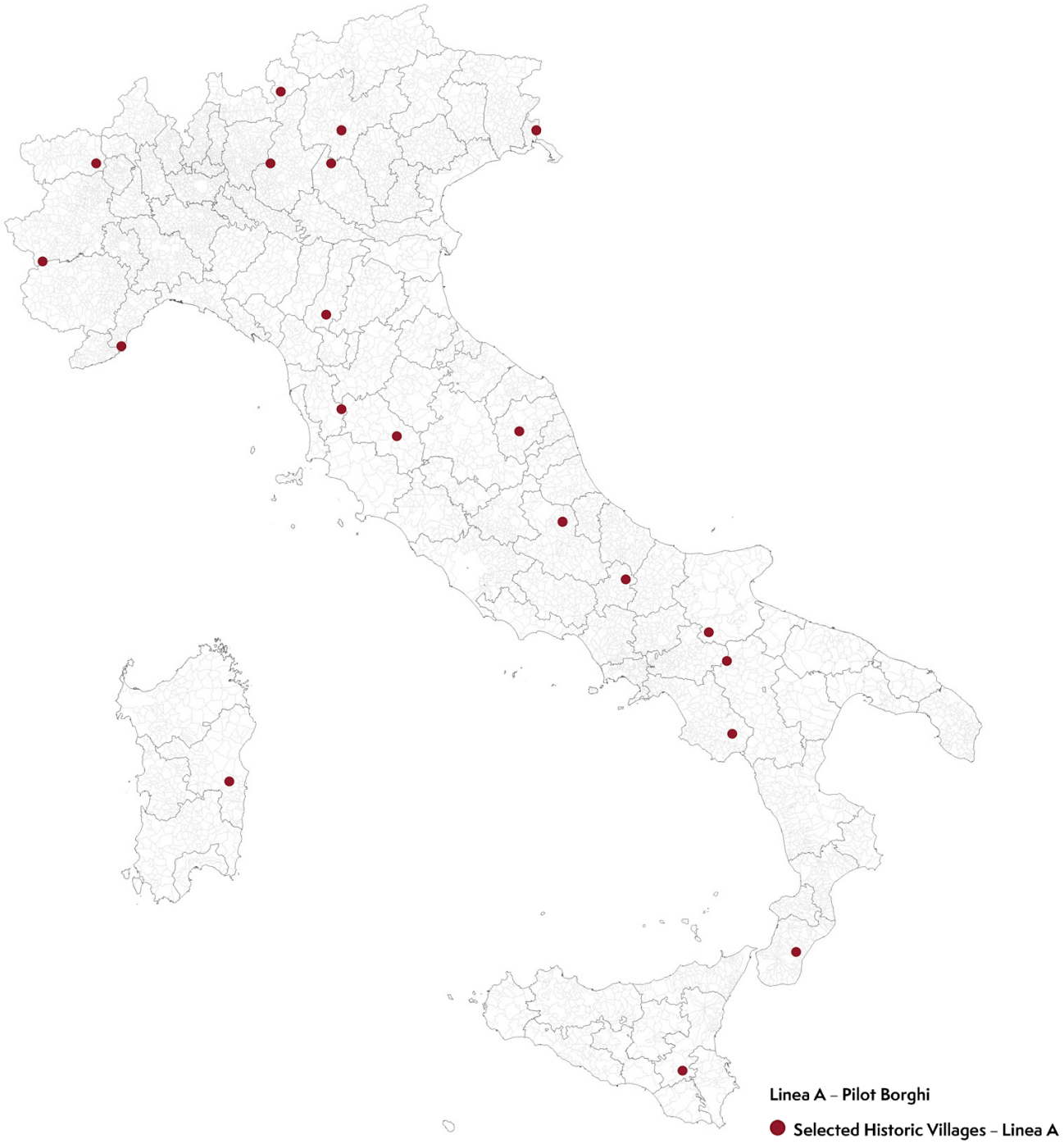


Fig 2.6 PNRR Borghi Plan : Map of the Historic Villages Selected for Line A

Source: https://borghi.cultura.gov.it/



Fig 2.7 PNRR Borghi Plan : Map of the Historic Villages Selected for Line B

Source: https://borghi.cultura.gov.it/

Overview of the Borghi Plan

The PNRR Borghi Plan was presented as a flagship policy for regenerating Italy's small towns, structured in two lines of intervention:

Line A: €20 million for one selected village per region, designed as a showcase of cultural and touristic regeneration.

Line B: smaller allocations distributed across numerous municipalities, mostly for digitalisation, cultural events, and small-scale upgrades.

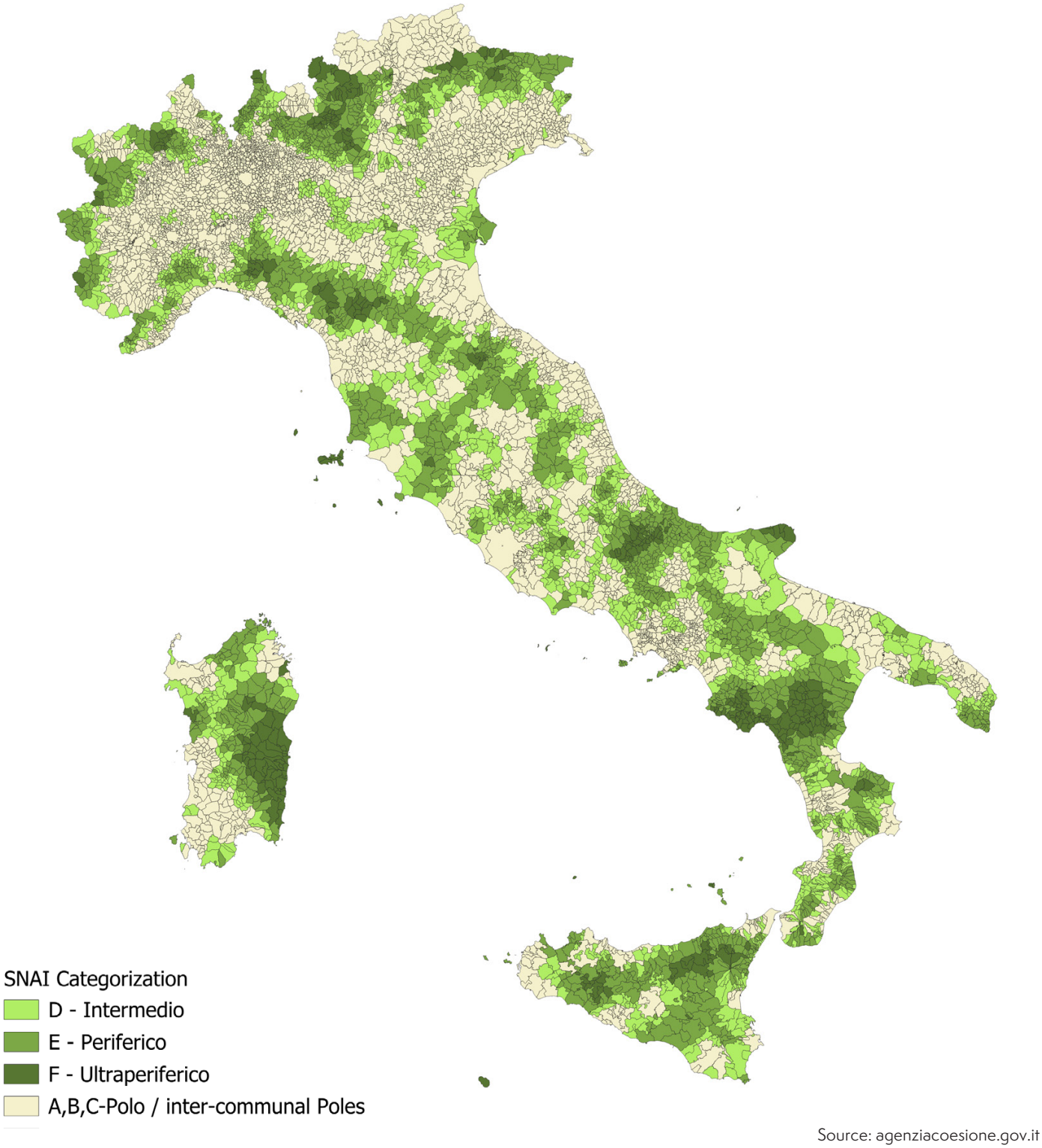
While ambitious in scale, the plan has been criticised for being selective and fragmented. Line **A concentrates massive resources into a single "winner" per region, creating isolated flagships that risk remaining disconnected**. Line B spreads funds thinly, often too limited to confront the structural conditions of shrinkage, such as depopulation, ageing, or service loss. As some scholars note, the Borghi Plan privileges visibility and branding over structural resilience (Cersosimo & Donzelli, 2022; Tricarico, 2023).

In Enna, the selected municipalities including Agira, Calascibetta, Centuripe, Gagliano Castelferrato, Leonforte, Nicosia, Piazza Armerina, Troina, and Valguarnera Caropepe carry rich historic fabrics and cultural resources. Yet, despite Borghi funds, the province continues to register steep demographic decline and infrastructural fragility. The investments risk beautifying centres without addressing mobility, healthcare, or job creation, leaving the core drivers of shrinkage untouched.

In Biella, initiatives tied to the Borghi Plan reinforce the city's existing heritage branding particularly around textile history and UNESCO listed Sacred Mountains but the interventions remain piecemeal. They cannot by themselves compensate for decades of industrial decline and the erosion of employment bases.

Overall, the Borghi Plan often acts as a cosmetic strategy, polishing facades and promoting cultural showcases while neglecting structural needs. In provinces like Enna and Biella, the contradiction is clear. **The material fabric of piazzas and palazzi may be repainted, but the deeper issues like demographic contraction, infrastructural marginalisation, loss of services remain unresolved.**

The critique is therefore not about investing in heritage, but about how these investments are structured. Without integration into broader strategies such as mobility, housing, health, and work the Borghi Plan risks producing symbolic islands of regeneration that cannot sustain long-term resilience.



Source: agenziacoesione.gov.it

Fig 2.8 SNAI categorization

SNAI Framework:

The Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne (SNAI) is the main national policy addressing territorial fragility in Italy. It recognises that a large share of municipalities are structurally distant from essential services and are affected by demographic decline, economic stagnation, and institutional weakening. Rather than treating these territories as temporary anomalies, SNAI frames marginality as a measurable and spatial condition within the national system.

The framework classifies municipalities according to their accessibility to three essential services like education, healthcare, and mobility, establishing a hierarchy from central service hubs to the most remote territories. This accessibility-based model introduces a clear spatial logic, distance from services becomes the primary indicator of vulnerability and policy priority.

While this approach effectively captures service marginality, it only partially addresses the condition of historic centres in medium-sized towns. Many peripheral municipalities identified within SNAI also face population loss and the progressive underuse of their historic cores. However, shrinkage in these contexts is not solely determined by service distance. It is shaped by heritage constraints, fragmented ownership patterns, ageing populations, and the erosion of everyday urban life within physically intact historic fabrics, dimensions that exceed SNAI's primarily functional classification.

For this research, SNAI functions as both a diagnostic lens and a territorial filter, helping identify areas where demographic fragility and service vulnerability converge. Provinces such as Biella and Enna become particularly relevant within this framework.

SNAI marks an important step in recognising structural territorial imbalance. This research builds upon its territorial recognition, while extending the analysis toward a more calibrated framework capable of governing long-term contraction within heritage-constrained urban cores.

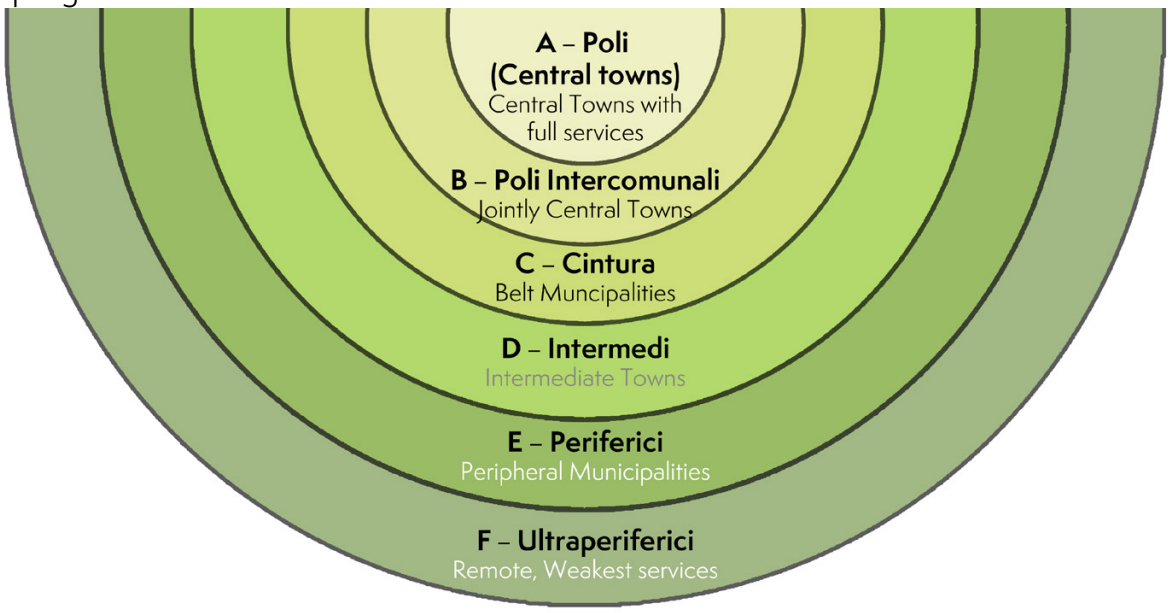


Fig 2.9 Snai Categorization of Municipalities

Previous Strategies and Policy Approaches to Shrinking Cities

Case Study I: Ostana - Regeneration of an Alpine Village

Ostana, a small alpine settlement in the Piedmont region, is one of the most striking examples of how a shrinking village can reinvent itself. From more than 1,200 inhabitants in 1921, the number had fallen to just five by the mid-1980s, leaving the settlement on the edge of complete abandonment. What changed Ostana's trajectory was **a visionary local administration, supported by the community cooperative Viso a Viso,** which started to see the mountains not as places of retreat but as places to live and thrive in.

The regeneration here has been holistic. Old stone and wooden houses were carefully restored, respecting alpine building traditions, while new uses were introduced to keep the village alive. Occitan culture became a cultural anchor, inspiring festivals and heritage projects, while the natural landscape was connected back into daily life through trail recovery, eco-tourism, and wellness projects. Alongside these, new economic activities such as agritourism farms, B&Bs, and a bakery added a fresh layer of vitality. The village even attracted educational and research institutions, turning Ostana into a small laboratory of sustainability and eco-design.

Social innovation has been equally important. Refugees and volunteers have been welcomed, creating a unique form of intercultural cooperation that gives Ostana a wider meaning beyond its valley. Today, the village counts about 80 permanent residents and hundreds of seasonal visitors. It is recognised as one of the Borghi più belli d'Italia and has become part of the Smart Rural Areas 21 network, proving that even the smallest communities can become pioneers of rural innovation.

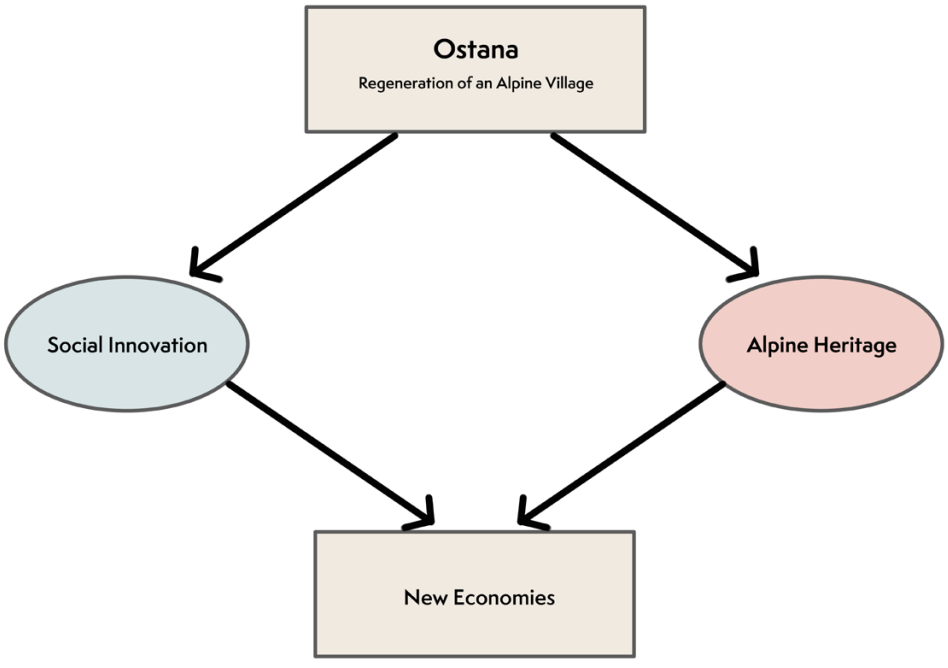


Fig 2.10 Heritage Restoration Model

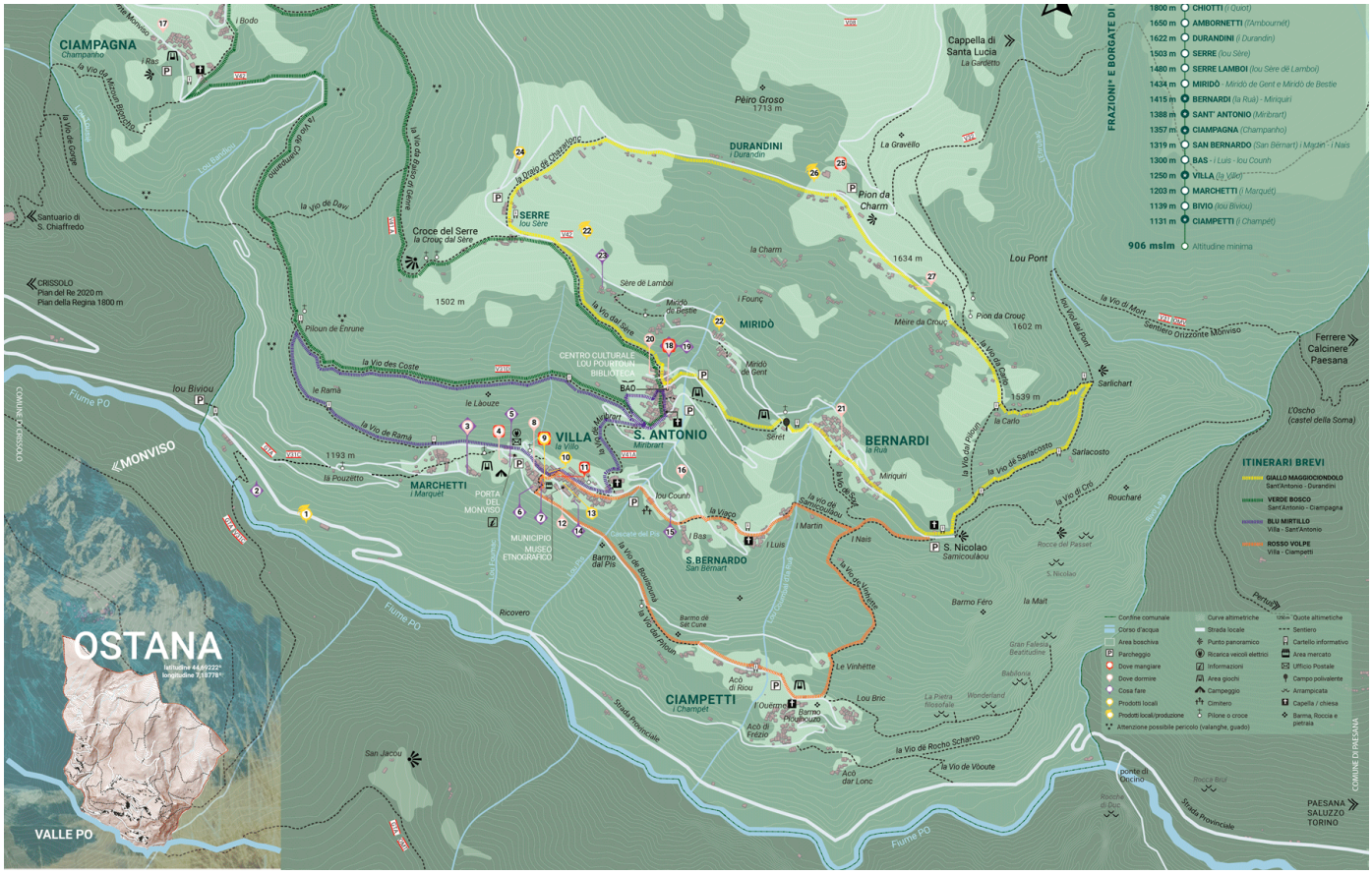




Fig 2.11 Ostana Regeneration of Alpine Village

Source: www.comune.ostana.cn.it

Policy Structure and Stakeholders:

- **Local Municipality & Mayor:** initiated and steered the vision for regeneration, ensuring continuity over time.
- **Community Cooperative (Viso a Viso):** mobilised local actors and designed projects rooted in cultural heritage.
- **Regional & National Institutions:** provided financial and administrative support through rural development funds and cultural heritage programs.
- **Educational & Research Actors:** institutes like Monviso Institute and universities integrated Ostana into wider sustainability debates.
- **Civil Society & Refugees:** contributed to voluntary work, intercultural innovation, and strengthened community resilience.

Ostana demonstrates how even the most fragile alpine settlements can regenerate when multi-level policies (municipal to European) intersect with strong local leadership and grassroots engagement.tourism flows, created jobs, and strengthened social participation. It shows that heritage, when framed as a living resource, can become the basis of resilience and sustainable development.

Case Study II: Casa Macchi: a heritage-driven, place-based model for small towns.

A very different example comes from Morazzone, a small town of about 4,400 inhabitants in Lombardy, located a few kilometres from Varese and within the wider metropolitan sphere of Milan. Like many Italian small towns and aree interne, Morazzone has been affected by population decline, the closure of shops and artisanal activities, and competition from larger urban centres. These processes led to a weakening of the town's historic core, with visible decline in commercial vitality and heritage preservation.

The turning point came when Casa Macchi, a historic residence in the centre of the town, was bequeathed to FAI (Fondo Ambiente Italiano). Through a Goal Commitment Contract involving the municipality, the Lombardy Region, the Province of Varese, and FAI, Casa Macchi was restored and repurposed as a house-museum and cultural hub. The project **combined architectural conservation with sustainability measures** (energy retrofitting, water reuse, biodiversity protection) and introduced new community-oriented functions such as a small emporium operating on circular economy principles. Alongside this, new pedestrian and cycling connections were created to link Casa Macchi with the church, the town square, and wider heritage trails.

This intervention demonstrates how heritage led regeneration can reactivate a shrinking small town. By combining conservation, community engagement, and sustainable economic activities, the Casa Macchi project re-established Morazzone's cultural identity, generated new tourism flows, created jobs, and strengthened social participation. It shows that heritage, when framed as a living resource, can become the basis of resilience and sustainable development.

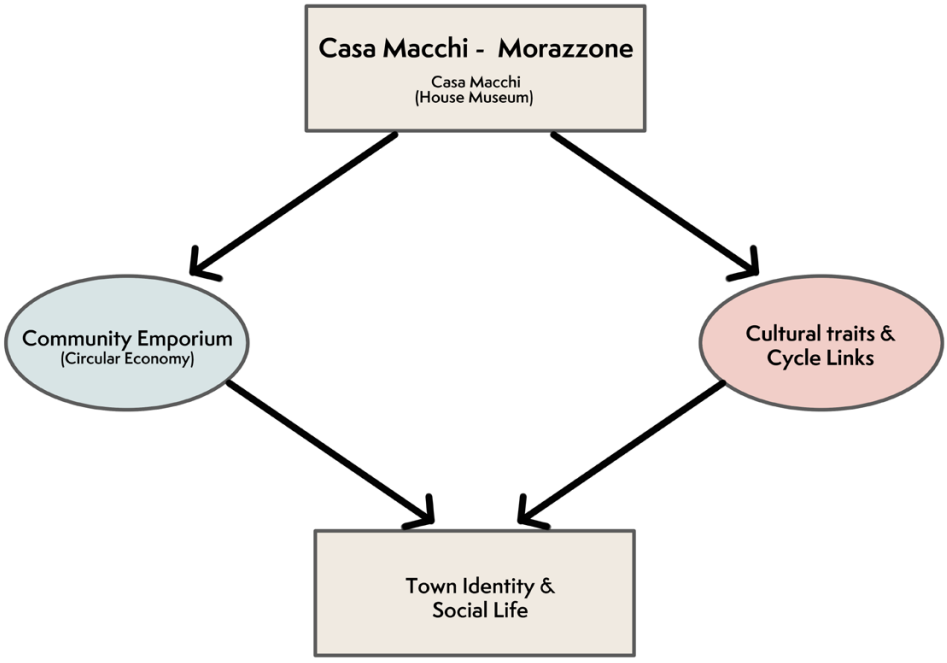


Fig 2.12 Heritage Model



Fig 2.13 Casa Macchi : A Heritage diven Model

Source: sciencedirect.com
Dipartimento di Ingegneria Civile e Architettura (DICAr)

Policy Structure and Stakeholders:

The governance of Casa Macchi is particularly notable because it combines national, regional, provincial, and local levels with a strong non-profit actor:

- **FAI (Fondo Ambiente Italiano):** main actor, responsible for restoration and management, integrating heritage conservation with sustainability and community engagement.
- **Municipality of Morazzone:** promoter of the Goal Commitment Contract (2017), coordinating regeneration of the historic centre.
- **Lombardy Region:** provided co-financing and linked the project to regional strategies for sustainable development and heritage enhancement.
- **Province of Varese:** joined in 2022, contributing infrastructure improvements such as pedestrian and cycling loops.
- **Fondazione Cariplo:** funded specific interventions, particularly the emporium.
- **Consultants and Universities (Insubria, Pisa, Pavia):** contributed to research, diagnostics, and training of professionals.
- **Community & Volunteers:** nearly 30 volunteers, along with schools and associations, created social participation and educational programs.

This layered structure shows how a public-private partnership anchored in heritage can become a catalyst for broader urban regeneration. Casa Macchi is no longer just a preserved villa but a living hub, where memory, economy, and sustainability intertwine to reanimate the identity of Morazzone.

Case Study III: Sicani Area - Re-Inhabiting Inner Territories in Sicily

The Sicani territory, lying between Palermo and Agrigento, tells a very different story. Here, the scale is larger: 18 municipalities, scattered across hilly and mountainous terrain, all facing the same issues of outmigration, aging, and marginalisation. Between 2011 and 2019 the area lost over 11% of its population, while the old-age index climbed to more than 260. Accessibility is weak, with abandoned railways and poor road links reinforcing its sense of peripherality.

Against this backdrop, the Branding4Resilience (B4R) project, together with the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), has framed the **Sicani area as a test ground for new regeneration approaches**. Mapping exercises revealed a rich landscape of resources: medieval centres, archaeological remains, unique crafts, and even confiscated mafia assets that could be reused for public purposes. At the same time, new socio-economic opportunities have started to emerge. Agro-food excellence, olive oil, wine, peaches, cheese, anchors the local economy, while tourism experiments such as the Val di Kam project in Sant'Angelo Muxaro promote experiential encounters rooted in storytelling and everyday life. Sambuca di Sicilia and Bivona launched one-euro house schemes, attracting international media and new settlers, while Cianciana has seen spontaneous arrivals from northern Europe.

Despite the fragility of the system, these small sparks suggest that the Sicani area is moving from pure decline to experimentation. Newcomers, associations, and municipalities are piecing together a collective story, one that frames the inner periphery not as a burden but as a laboratory for alternative ways of living.

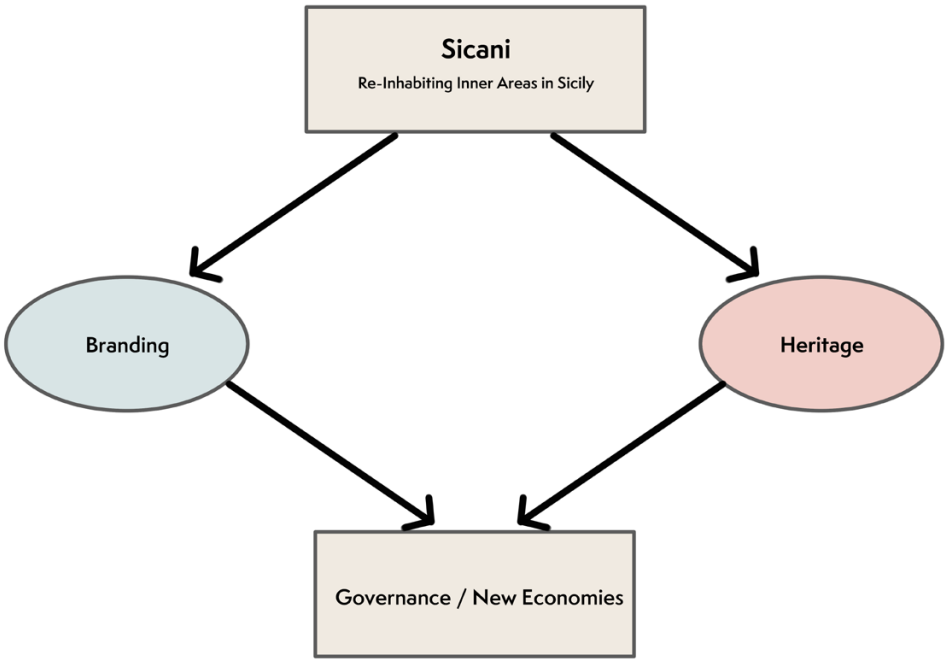


Fig 2.14 Re-Inhabiting Model

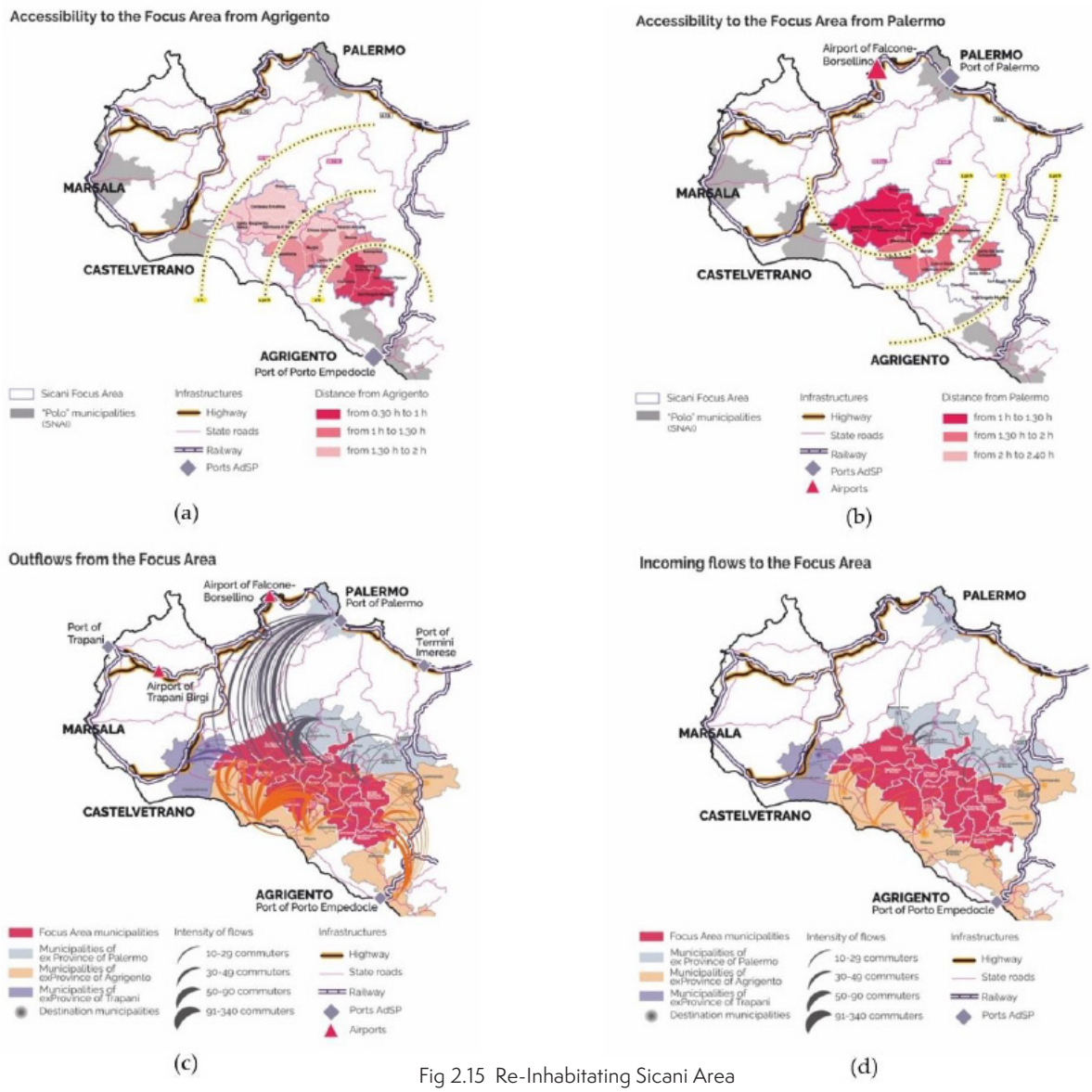


Fig 2.15 Re-Inhabitating Sicani Area

Source: https://www.mdpi.com/1451440

Policy Structure and Stakeholders:

- **Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne (SNAI):** provides the overarching national policy framework to strengthen services (education, health, mobility) in marginal territories.
- **GAL Sicani (Local Action Group):** manages EU rural development funds, supports branding (Sicani Rural Quality District), and fosters cooperation among municipalities.
- **Municipal Administrations (18 towns):** implement local initiatives, from one-euro houses to heritage festivals.
- **Universities & B4R Project Partners:** University of Palermo, Politecnico di Torino, and others act as scientific mediators, producing maps, frameworks, and strategies.
- **Private Stakeholders:** local entrepreneurs, real estate agencies, agrifood producers, and tourism operators contribute to economic regeneration.
- **Civil Society & New Inhabitants:** associations, cultural groups, and neo-rural migrants strengthen social capital and bring new narratives to the territory.

This governance mix highlights both opportunities (multi-level collaboration, innovative branding) and challenges (fragmented policies, uneven municipal capacities) in implementing sustainable regeneration.

Case Study IV: Favara - Shrinkage-driven revitalization through cultural and social reuse

Favara is a medium-sized town in inland Sicily, located near Agrigento, with a historic centre of medieval origin characterized by a dense and fragile urban fabric. Similar to many towns in the internal areas of southern Italy, Favara has experienced long-term demographic decline, economic stagnation, and progressive abandonment of its historic core. The shrinkage process has been gradual and structural, driven by youth outmigration, limited employment opportunities, and the weakening of the agricultural economy. As a result, the historic centre suffered from vacancy, building decay, and a loss of social and functional vitality.

The turning point for Favara came with the Farm Cultural Park, a privately initiated cultural regeneration project launched in 2010 within the historic centre. Instead of large-scale public redevelopment, the project focused on small-scale, incremental interventions through the reuse of abandoned buildings and courtyards.

The strategy combined contemporary art, cultural production, temporary uses, and community-oriented activities, transforming neglected spaces into galleries, cultural venues, and public spaces.

This approach did not aim to reverse shrinkage entirely, but rather to reinterpret it as an opportunity for experimentation, flexibility, and adaptive reuse. The intervention embraced the existing urban fabric and informal spatial qualities of the historic centre, avoiding demolition and large infrastructural transformations.

The revitalization of Favara's historic centre produced visible spatial and symbolic impacts, including improved public spaces, renewed attention to heritage buildings, and increased national and international visibility. Cultural tourism and short-term stays increased, contributing to a partial economic revival. However, demographic decline was not fully reversed, and issues such as social inclusion, long-term affordability, and dependence on cultural tourism remain critical.

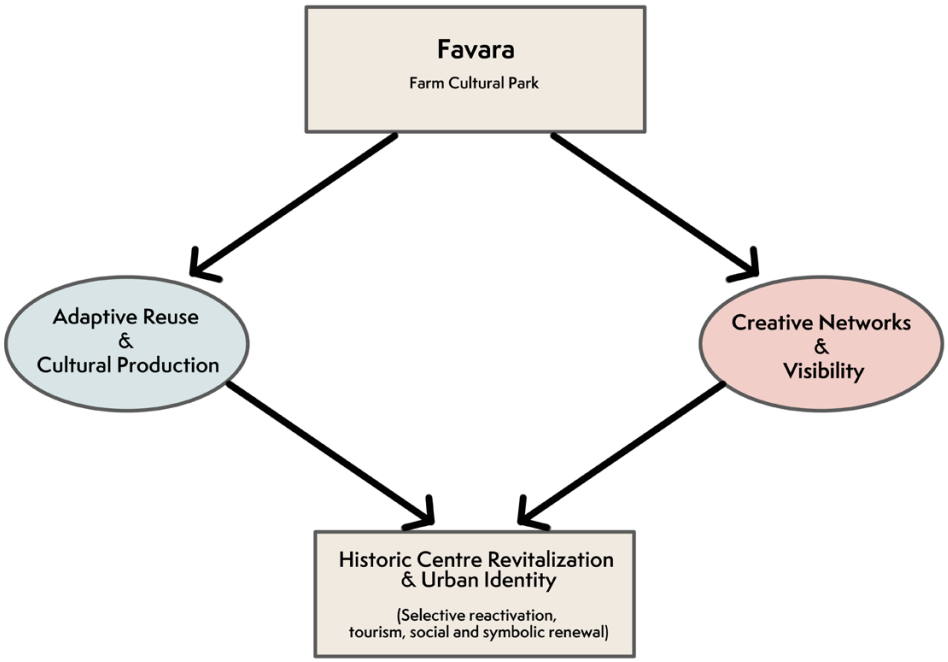


Fig 2.16 Cultural Revitalization Model



Fig 2.17 Favara: Cultural Revitalization

Source: https://www.farmculturalpark.com/

Policy Structure and Stakeholders:

- **Municipal Planning Framework (PRG and local regulations):** provides the basic statutory planning context for the historic centre, mainly focused on building regulations and heritage constraints, with limited strategic orientation toward shrinkage or regeneration.
- **Farm Cultural Park (flagship project):** acts as the main catalyst for revitalization, introducing cultural production, adaptive reuse of abandoned buildings, and experimental uses within the historic centre, outside conventional planning tools.
- **Municipal Administration of Favara:** supports the initiative primarily through regulatory flexibility, administrative facilitation, and selective infrastructural interventions, without leading a comprehensive regeneration strategy.
- **Regional and National Cultural Policies:** indirectly contribute through cultural funding schemes, heritage protection frameworks, and occasional project-based support, rather than through an integrated inner-area policy.
- **Private Stakeholders:** cultural entrepreneurs, small property owners, hospitality operators, and creative industries contribute to economic activation and reuse of the built heritage.
- **Cultural Networks and Creative Communities:** artists, designers, curators, and international cultural actors strengthen Favara's visibility and reposition the historic centre as a place of cultural production.
- **Local Residents and Civil Society:** participate unevenly in the regeneration process, with some benefiting from renewed services and attention, while others remain marginal to decision-making.

Case Study V: Leipzig, Germany - Managing Shrinkage in a Post-Industrial City

Leipzig is perhaps the most emblematic shrinking city in Europe. After the reunification of Germany in 1990, the city went through rapid deindustrialisation that dismantled its economic base almost overnight. Factories closed, unemployment soared, and many residents left for western Germany. By the end of the 1990s, Leipzig was left with high vacancy rates, declining neighbourhoods, and large brownfield areas that symbolised its crisis.

What distinguishes Leipzig is not just the depth of its shrinkage but the way it was confronted. Instead of ignoring decline, Leipzig chose to work with it. The federal programme Stadtumbau Ost (Urban Restructuring East), launched in 2001, openly acknowledged shrinkage as a long-term reality. Through this, large numbers of **surplus Housing units were demolished**, especially in prefabricated estates, while reinvestment targeted compact and historically valuable areas. Vacancy management became a deliberate planning tool, while some neighbourhoods were strategically reduced, others were stabilised and upgraded.

Alongside demolition, Leipzig also embraced reuse and innovation. Cleared sites were not left empty but converted into green infrastructure, pocket parks, or spaces for cultural projects. Inspired by models like IBA Emscher Park, the city developed ecological corridors and temporary cultural venues on land once marked by abandonment. Governance also played a crucial role. Leipzig pioneered collaborative planning where municipal authorities, housing associations, and civic groups worked together to coordinate where to contract, where to reinvest, and how to reuse urban voids.

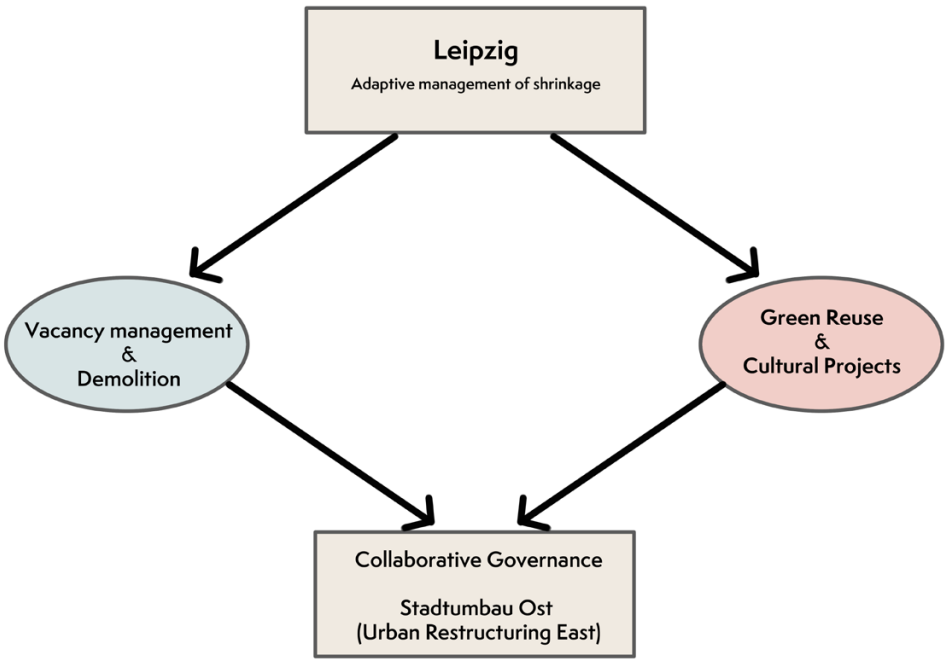


Fig 2.18 Demolition & Reuse Model



Fig 2.19 Leipzig: Selective Demolition Model

Source: https://www.leipzig.de/stadtumbau

Over time, this approach shifted the narrative of Leipzig from a city in terminal decline to a place of experimentation. It became internationally recognised as a benchmark for managing shrinkage, showing how crisis can be reframed as a driver of spatial, ecological, and cultural innovation.

Policy Structure and Stakeholders:

- **Federal / State Programmes:** Stadtumbau Ost was funded and framed at the federal level, with matching state and city funds.
- **Municipal Government (City of Leipzig):** central role in selecting neighbourhoods for demolition, stabilization, and green reuse.
- **Housing Associations & Real Estate Actors:** owners of large housing estates (especially GDR-era prefabricated blocks) participated in vacancy management, demolition, or renovation.
- **Civil Society / NGOs / Cultural Actors:** collaborated in repurposing cleared land for cultural, ecological, or temporary uses.
- **Research & Planning Institutions:** scholars and planners helped with mapping oversupply, forecasting future demand, and designing shrinkage strategies (e.g. The "Perforated City" research)

Comparative Synthesis: Five Models of Shrinkage

1. Ostana - The Village Laboratory

Ostana embodies the micro-scale heritage and community model. Its resilience strategy grows from alpine identity, Occitan traditions, and small-scale innovation. Instead of relying on large infrastructures, the village thrives on community cohesion, intercultural inclusion, and adaptive reuse of traditional architecture. In this sense, Ostana becomes a living laboratory of shrinkage, where old stones meet new ideas, and where cultural continuity is paired with experimental forms of social and economic life.

2. Sicani Inner Area - The Territorial Network

The Sicani inner area illustrates a meso-scale model built on governance and branding. Here, shrinkage is tackled collectively by 18 municipalities through the Sicani Rural Quality District, agro-food excellence, and neo-rural migration. Unlike Ostana's intimacy, Sicani relies on networks, distributed identity, and shared assets. Its strength lies in repositioning marginal lands as destinations of value through cooperation and landscape valorisation, though the persistence of weak accessibility and fragmented governance makes the process fragile.

3. Casa Macchi, Morazzone - The Heritage Anchor

Casa Macchi demonstrates how a single symbolic site can catalyse regeneration at the small-town scale. Through the restoration of this bourgeois residence into a house-museum and community emporium, Morazzone's historic centre was reactivated with cultural and economic life. Unlike Sicani's dispersed strategy or Ostana's full-village transformation, Casa Macchi works through heritage as an anchor. It re-centres place identity, strengthens continuity, and generates new tourism flows, proving that even modest towns can find resilience in a carefully curated core.

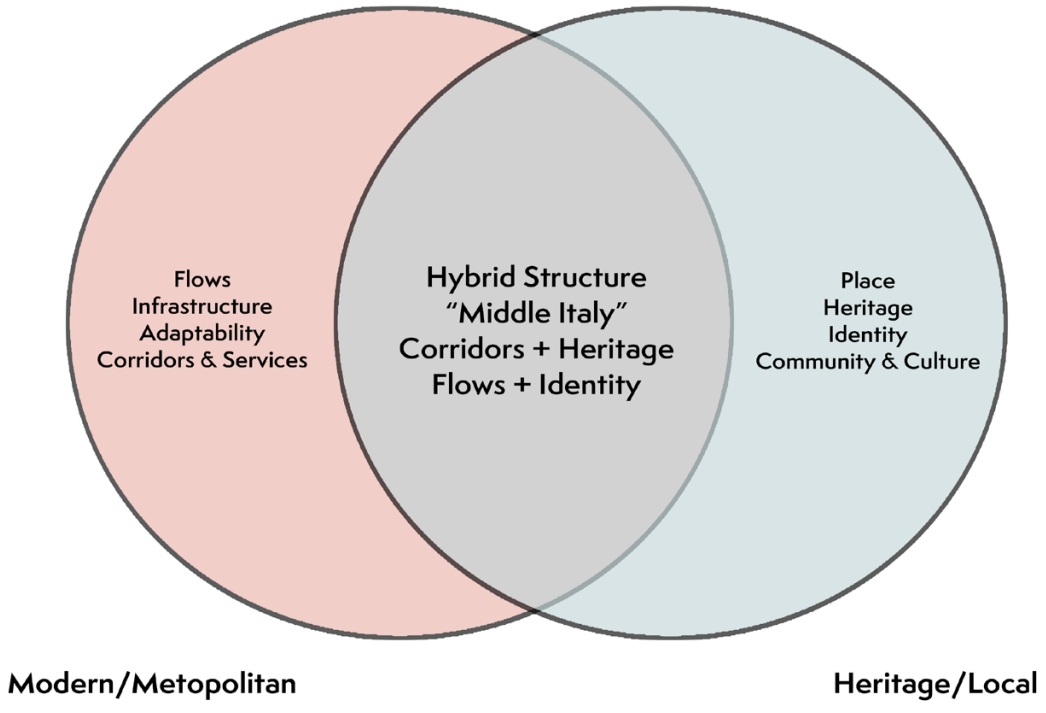


Fig 2.20 Modern vs Heritage approach to shrinking cities

4. Favara - The Cultural Catalyst in a Mid-Size Town

Favara occupies an intermediate position between small towns and larger urban systems, where shrinkage is expressed through the gradual weakening of the historic centre rather than complete territorial abandonment. The Farm Cultural Park acts as a cultural catalyst,reactivating vacant buildings through art, temporary uses, and creative networks. Unlike Casa Macchi's single heritage anchor or Sicani's territorial governance model, Favara works through selective and incremental interventions within a still-functioning town. Its strength lies in transforming decline into visibility and identity-building, though the reliance on cultural tourism and the absence of a strong institutional framework reveal the limits of project-led regeneration in mid-size shrinking cities.

5. Leipzig - The Post-Industrial Managerial Model

Leipzig offers a distinct paradigm: a shrinkage acceptance model. Instead of resisting decline, Leipzig reframed it as a structural condition. The Stadtumbau Ost programme institutionalised vacancy management, large-scale demolition, and the greening of cleared sites. Here, resilience is not heritage-led but spatial and ecological rationalisation, coordinated through multi-level governance. Its uniqueness lies in making absence productive—transforming empty housing and brownfields into opportunities for ecological and cultural reuse.

From Local to Global: Complementary Paradigms

These five models are not opposites but a continuum of strategies, each responding to shrinkage at a different scale:

- **Ostana** → resilience through community and heritage at the village scale.
- **Sicani** → resilience through territorial branding and inter-municipal networks.
- **Casa Macchi** → resilience through symbolic heritage anchors in small towns.
- **Favara** → resilience through cultural catalysts and selective revitalization in mid-size towns.
- **Leipzig** → resilience through vacancy management and structural contraction.

Together they suggest that shrinkage is not a single trajectory but a plural condition, demanding both localised identity-based renewal and systemic infrastructural adaptation.

Case study	Scale / Settlement type	Main problem
Ostana : Village Laboratory	Village / micro-scale	Severe depopulation, loss of services, cultural erosion
Sicani Inner Area: Territorial Network	Inner area / multi-municipal territory	Structural marginality, isolation, fragmented municipalities
Casa Macchi : Heritage Anchor	Small town	Loss of centrality of historic core, weak local economy
Favara : Cultural Catalyst	Medium-sized town	Decline and abandonment of historic centre within an active urban system
Leipzig : Shrinkage Management	Post-industrial city	Large-scale population loss, housing vacancy, brownfields

Key interventions	Main takeaway / transferable policy structure
Community-led regeneration, adaptive reuse of vernacular architecture, cultural revival (Occitan identity), cooperative models	**Community-based resilience**: shrinkage can be managed through strong local identity, social cohesion, and bottom-up governance rather than infrastructure-heavy solutions
Territorial branding, inter-municipal cooperation, agro-food networks, neo-rural migration	**Territorial governance model**: addressing shrinkage through networks, shared identity, and coordination beyond municipal boundaries
Restoration of a symbolic heritage building, house-museum, community emporium, cultural tourism	**Heritage as anchor**: a single well-curated heritage project can reactivate identity, economy, and social life at small-town scale
Cultural-led adaptive reuse, art-based regeneration, temporary uses, creative networks	**Project-led hybrid strategy**: cultural catalysts can selectively reactivate historic centres, but need stronger policy integration to ensure long-term resilience
Vacancy management, selective demolition, greening, institutionalised shrinkage policies	**Shrinkage acceptance model**: decline can be managed structurally through planning tools, land recycling, and ecological reuse

Table 2.1 Comparative Matrix of Shrinkage Case Studies



Fig 2.21 Policy Gap in the system

Despite the presence of articulated policy frameworks for both small villages and metropolitan regions, medium-sized towns remain largely unaddressed within shrinkage oriented planning. Small towns benefit from community-based, heritage-led programmes, while metropolitan regions have developed explicit strategies to manage decline through infrastructural reorganisation, vacancy management, and ecological restructuring. In contrast, **mid-size historic towns operate in a policy vacuum, where shrinkage is neither fully acknowledged nor strategically managed.** Interventions are often project-led, fragmented, and dependent on cultural or entrepreneurial initiatives rather than embedded structural policies. This missing policy layer produces a hybrid condition, where heritage activation is not supported by infrastructural, social, or demographic strategies, making revitalization fragile and uneven.

The Hybrid Space

When viewed together, these models suggest a hybrid strategy especially relevant for contexts like Middle Italy. Here, small historic towns (Casa Macchi, Ostana) and broader territorial systems (Sicani) coexist within regional networks, while facing pressures that resemble Leipzig's decline, The overlap lies in combining:

- **Heritage micro-centralities** (revitalised villages and historic cores)
- **With connective corridors and infrastructures** (regional and metropolitan flows).

In this way, shrinkage can be reframed as a multi-scalar opportunity: community-led renewal grounds identity, while infrastructural adaptability ensures systemic resilience

From Micro to Macro: Policy Structures

Looking across these cases, a gradient emerges. At the smallest scales (Ostana, Casa Macchi), policies revolve around community, heritage, and targeted partnerships. At the territorial scale (Sicani), they rely on multi-municipal cooperation under national frameworks. At metropolitan level (Leipzig, Tokyo), policies are about managing systems and infrastructures, often through top-down programmes or visionary frameworks.

What Lies In-Between? Medium-Sized Cities

By comparing metropolitan strategies with village or small-town strategies, we are left with a crucial question: what policies should be built for medium-sized cities?

These places often present a discontinuous situation: parts of the city may remain stable or even growing, while the historic centre or peripheral neighbourhoods are suffering from population loss, vacancy, or decay. They are too large to rely only on community-led initiatives(Favara), but too small to apply metropolitan-level infrastructural solutions.

For these contexts, especially in Middle Italy, the path forward must combine both lessons:

- **Heritage micro-centralities** to revitalise historic centres and anchor community identity.
- **Infrastructural and ecological corridors** to connect them to broader regional systems.
- **Flexible governance tools** that can manage uneven patterns of shrinkage within the same city.

Key takeaway

The five models are not opposites, but complementary paradigms. Ostana and Casa Macchi highlight the power of heritage and community. Sicani underlines the importance of territorial networks and cooperation. Leipzig proves that structural management of decline can be a positive policy choice. Fiber City imagines metropolitan adaptability built on flows and corridors.

For medium-sized cities, the challenge is to sit between these worlds. Policies must bridge local identity and systemic connectivity, weaving together heritage renewal with infrastructural adaptation. Only in this hybrid space can shrinking towns and cities sustain resilience within broader regional and national systems.

2.6 Italia di Mezzo: The Missing Middle in Italian Policy

Even though urban shrinkage is now widely discussed within the Italian planning debate, the position of Italia di Mezzo within these discussions remains weak and unclear. Most policies and strategies tend to focus on two very specific situations: large metropolitan areas dealing with restructuring or selective decline, and small towns or borghi in inland areas facing strong depopulation. Between these two categories, medium-sized cities in **Middle Italy specially those with historic centers often remain invisible and are rarely addressed directly.**

Shrinkage in Italy is not a uniform process, but one that varies significantly depending on historical development, territorial structure, and socio-economic conditions. However, when this complexity enters policy frameworks, it often becomes simplified into rigid territorial categories. **Cities in Italia di Mezzo are frequently considered as "still functioning"** or relatively stable, mainly because they are not completely marginal or isolated. This perception tends to hide the slow and cumulative processes of population loss, ageing, and functional decline that are taking place, particularly within historic city centres.

In these territories, urban retraction is rarely treated as a long-term structural condition. Instead, it is often approached through partial or temporary solutions. Policies tend to focus on physical regeneration, the reuse of heritage buildings, or image-making strategies, without fully engaging with the everyday decline of residents, services, and local economies. Historic centres are protected as cultural assets, yet at the same time they are becoming less lived in and progressively less central to urban life.

At the national level, initiatives such as the Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne have played an important role in recognising depopulation as a major territorial issue. However, these policies mainly target small municipalities and remote areas. Many medium-sized cities in Italia di Mezzo experience similar demographic and socio-economic dynamics, but they do not fit the criteria of inner areas and therefore remain excluded from specific policy tools and forms of support. This creates a clear gap between the real territorial conditions and the planning instruments available to address them.

As a result, Italia di Mezzo tends to be recognised more within academic debates than in actual planning strategies. It remains an "in-between territory", **neither a priority area nor a clearly defined policy category**. Yet this space is not marginal in quantitative terms. It includes a significant share of Italy's population and territory, composed of medium-sized cities, historic towns, peri-urban settlements, and productive landscapes. Shrinkage here does not appear as a dramatic collapse, but rather as a quiet and gradual process,young people leaving, services slowly disappearing, housing in historic centres becoming empty. These changes are often not strong enough to trigger emergency responses, but together they deeply affect everyday life and the long-term urban role of these places.

For these reasons, Italia di Mezzo represents a crucial scale for investigating the relationship between shrinkage, heritage, and urban resilience. Focusing on this territorial condition allows the research to move **beyond the traditional centre-periphery divide and to engage with ordinary yet strategic places where decline and potential coexist**. By concentrating on historic centres within medium-sized cities, this study questions whether planning approaches developed for inner areas and Borghi can be adapted to these contexts, and how shrinkage can be managed without losing cultural value, identity, and urban relevance.





Chapter III

Mapping shrinkage and heritage across Middle Italy

3.1 How Historical Urban Form Shapes Today's Decline

Patterns of demographic decline in Italy are not randomly distributed, but form recognisable spatial configurations shaped by geography, accessibility, and historical development. Population loss tends to concentrate in specific territorial belts, where medium-sized towns and historic settlements occupy increasingly fragile positions within wider regional systems. When read alongside urban morphology and heritage concentration, demographic trends reveal a growing mismatch between built form and contemporary patterns of habitation. Shrinkage, in this sense, becomes visible not through collapse, but through underuse, vacancy, and the gradual thinning of everyday life within spaces that were built for denser and more intense forms of occupation.

Italy's urban evolution has long been shaped by a multi-centred system, where small and medium-sized towns carried civic, cultural, and economic weight. This model, once the backbone of regional equilibrium, is now eroded as globalization and centralization redirect flows of people and resources toward metropolitan cores. Many intermediary towns today are suspended, no longer central, yet not peripheral enough to attract targeted interventions.

Unlike Northern Europe's centralized urban patterns, Italy developed through city-states and autonomous communes, producing a network of towns and villages bound by civic functions and symbolic identity. This created a unique continuity between urban and rural landscapes, For centuries, these towns acted as mediators, stitching together fragmented geographies with culture and logistics.

The late twentieth century, however, introduced new pressures: infrastructural concentration, metropolitan agglomeration, and global economic shifts. While their material legacy areas like piazzas, palazzi, civic rituals remains intact, their functional role has weakened, leaving empty institutions and fragmented communities. What is fading is not only services, but the capacity of these towns to represent themselves as centres of meaning and identity.

Beyond morphology, economic restructuring has significantly shaped this uneven geography of decline. In many intermediate territories, traditional manufacturing sectors that once sustained urban continuity have contracted or relocated, weakening local labour markets and municipal revenue bases. While services have expanded in numerical terms, they often remain low value and insufficient to compensate for industrial losses. This imbalance produces a dual fragility: demographic ageing accelerates as younger cohorts migrate outward, and the built environment, designed for higher employment intensity and denser occupation, becomes progressively underutilised. Shrinkage therefore reflects not only population decline, but a structural recalibration of economic functions across territory.

In this context, shrinkage should not be understood as a sudden collapse, but as a gradual decoupling between inherited urban form and contemporary socio-economic dynamics. Historic centres remain materially intact, yet their original role as administrative, productive, and symbolic anchors has weakened. The result is a subtle but persistent thinning of everyday life, where vacancy accumulates incrementally and civic spaces lose frequency rather than meaning. It is within this tension between permanence of form and fragility of function that the geography of Middle Italy's contraction becomes visible.

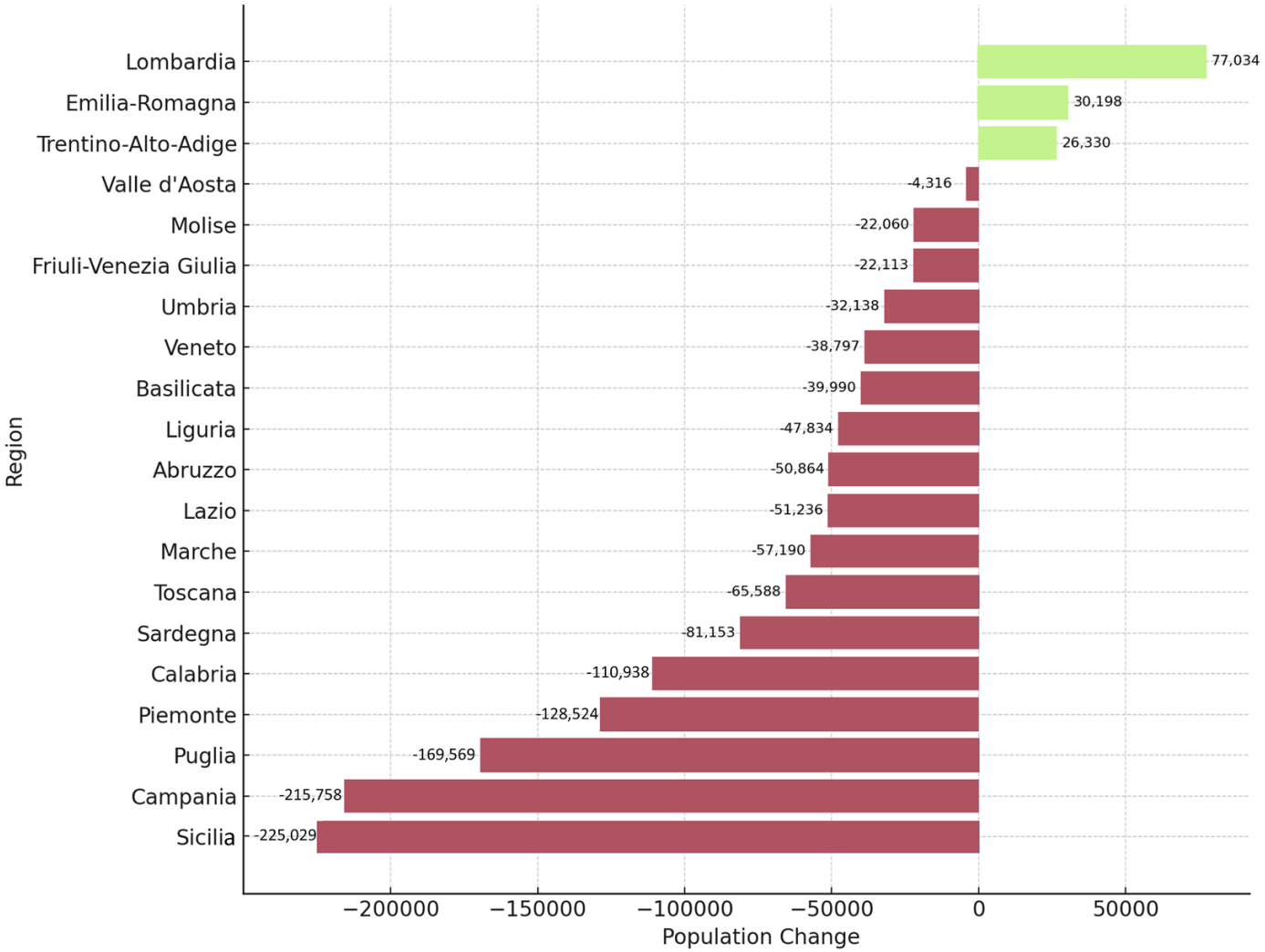


Fig 3.1 Population Trend through all Regions in the past decade 2015-2025

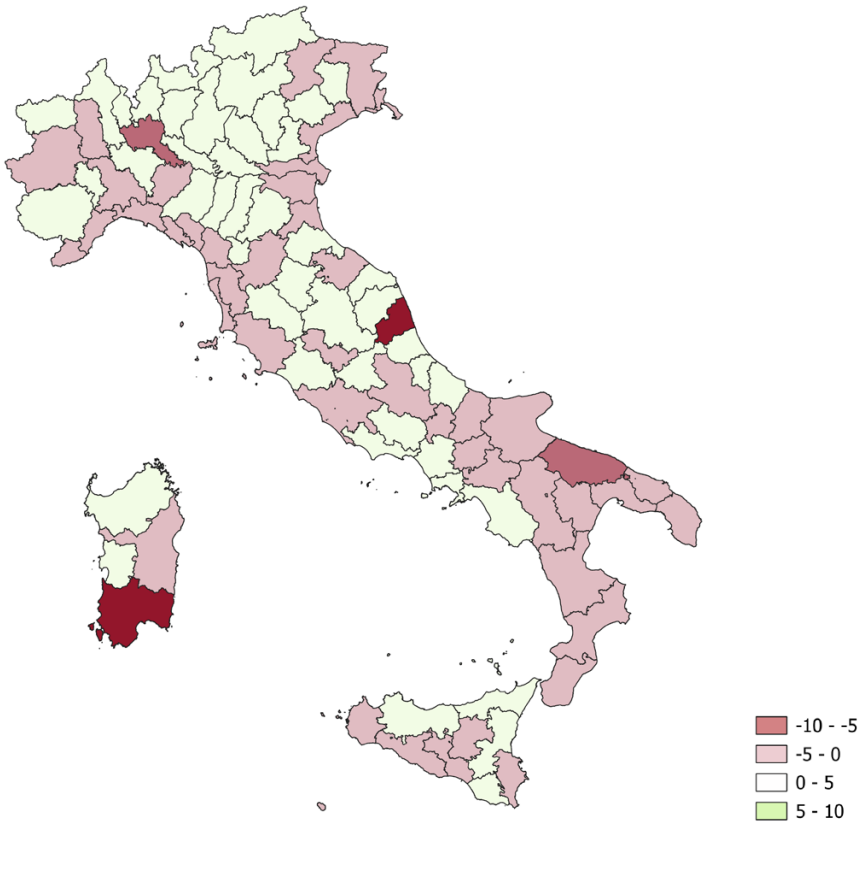
Source: ISTAT Database

Depopulation Geography

These maps shows the provincial population change across three decades (1991-2001, 2001-2011, 2011-2021), revealing that decline is neither isolated nor episodic, but territorially patterned and persistent. Losses of 5-10% per interval concentrate in inland and intermediate territories, confirming shrinkage as a long-term structural condition rather than a temporary demographic fluctuation.

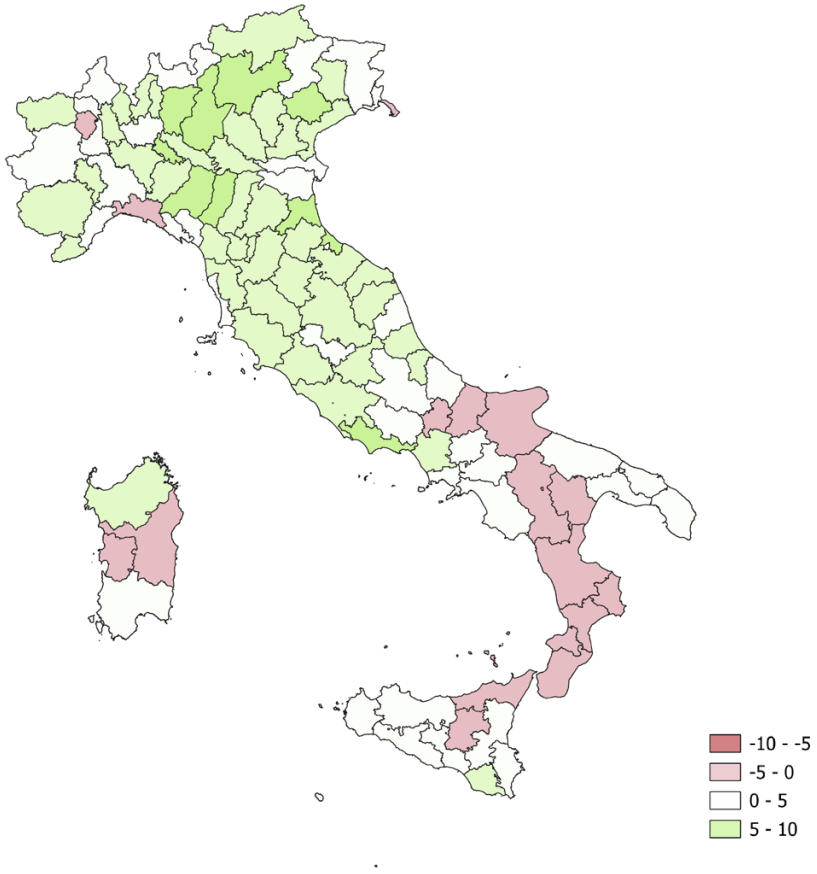
Geographically, this condition materialises through contiguous "cold spots", provinces that have experienced uninterrupted contraction across all three periods. These clusters reflect deeper structural fragilities, including limited accessibility, ageing populations, and economic stagnation, which gradually transform periodic population loss into systemic territorial thinning. In contrast, metropolitan poles retain relative demographic stability, buffering their cores while indirectly accelerating retreat in surrounding territories. This produces fragmented service geographies and a slow erosion of everyday urban intensity, even where the historic fabric remains morphologically intact.

Such a layered and uneven pattern requires planning responses that operate across scales. Territorial coordination is necessary to address widening polarization, while at the urban scale selective concentration can reinforce viable cores. At the micro scale, adaptive heritage interventions must recalibrate built fabric to reduced demand. In this way, spatial diagnosis becomes not merely descriptive, but the foundation for long-term, resilient territorial stewardship.



Source: ISTAT Database

Fig 3.2 Population trend of all provinces 1991-2001



Source: ISTAT Database

Fig 3.3 Population trend of all provinces
2001-2011

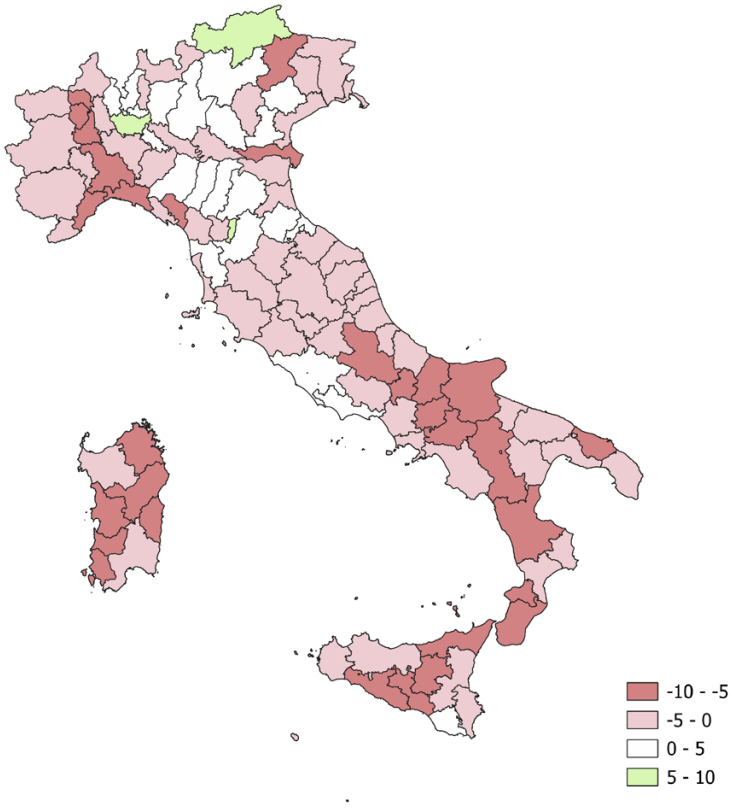


Fig 3.4 Population trend of all provinces
2011-2021

Source: ISTAT Database

3.2 The Spatial Distribution of Population Loss

Long-Term Decline Patters

Population decline in Italy is not a temporary fluctuation but a long-term, persistent trend. Looking at data measured on a fine scale of 100 sqm grid cells, it becomes clear how demographic retreat cuts across very different territorial contexts. Persistent decline refers to this steady and widespread reduction in population, which is particularly visible in mountainous areas, aree interne, and large portions of southern Italy and the islands. This trend highlights the gradual thinning of settlement structures and the weakening of communities that once seemed stable.

Systematic Decline and Structural Fragility

Beyond persistence, the data also reveals territories where decline has become systematic. Here, demographic loss is not isolated but emerges from deeper structural weaknesses: poor accessibility, economic stagnation, fragile service networks, and aging populations. These conditions create a self-reinforcing cycle, where decline triggers further decline, turning contraction into a structural and long-lasting feature rather than a temporary phenomenon.

The Uneven Role of Urban Cores

Urban cores continue to shape this geography of decline. Larger metropolitan centres still act as demographic anchors, concentrating population and resources, while many medium-sized and smaller cities retain enough services to slow or buffer surrounding losses. However, resilience is uneven: in particularly fragile contexts, even urban cores are beginning to lose their stabilizing function, reflecting the spread of decline from peripheries into central nodes.

Peripheral and Rural Retreat

The sharpest signs of demographic decline appear in peripheral and rural areas around cities. These zones suffer more consistent population loss, often accelerated by youth outmigration and aging populations. The result is vacant housing, underused infrastructure, and shrinking labor markets. Retreat in the margins intensifies territorial imbalances and reshapes the connections between cores and hinterlands.

A Layered Geography of Shrinkage

Taken together, persistent and systematic decline, along with the contrasting roles of cores and peripheries, reveal a layered geography of shrinkage. Persistent decline highlights the breadth and continuity of demographic retreat, while systematic decline points to areas where contraction is deeply rooted in social and economic structures. This uneven and interconnected landscape shows how Italy's demographic map is being slowly redrawn by long-term shrinkage.

Towards the Case of Intermediate Areas

Within this national overview, intermediate areas, neither large metropolitan centres nor the most remote internal towns, emerge as a critical context for further study. These territories show persistent and systematic decline over the last thirty years, representing a common ground where structural fragilities, limited services, and aging populations intersect. While urban cores can still concentrate population and some internal towns retain historical and cultural significance, intermediate areas often struggle to maintain a stabilizing role. This layered condition makes them a key laboratory for understanding how demographic decline embeds itself in social, economic, and spatial structures, and how it intersects with questions of resilience and sustainable planning strategies.

Dimension	Characteristics	Territorial Examples	Implications for Planning & Society
Persistent Decline	Continuous population loss observed over two or more decades. It is not a temporary fluctuation but a **long-term erosion of demographic presence**, producing thinning settlement patterns. Often connected to marginal geography (mountains, rural hinterlands) and weak demographic renewal.	Mountainous belts of the Alps and Apennines; parts of rural Sicily (Enna hinterland); Sardinian interior towns.	Gradual weakening of communities and everyday economies; shrinking demand for schools, local shops, and social life. Requires **adaptive reuse strategies** and flexible service provision to manage long-term contraction.
Systematic Decline	More than demographic retreat, these are areas marked by **structural fragility**: poor accessibility, economic stagnation, fragile service networks, and accelerated ageing. Decline here is embedded in economic and institutional structures, creating a **self-reinforcing cycle**.	Enna province (weak connectivity to Palermo/Catania); Calabria's inner areas; Alpine peripheries in Piemonte and Valle d'Aosta.	Shrinkage becomes **irreversible without systemic interventions**. Calls for integrated policies (mobility, welfare, local economies) rather than cosmetic regeneration.
Urban Core Resilience	Large metropolitan centres act as **population anchors**, concentrating services, infrastructures, and opportunities. Some medium-sized cities retain enough centrality to buffer decline in their hinterlands, though resilience is uneven.	Milan, Rome, Florence (strong anchors); Perugia, Ancona, L'Aquila (medium anchors).	Reinforces **territorial polarisation**: cores attract investment and people, but leave hinterlands exposed. Planning must address **spillover effects** and prevent overconcentration that accelerates peripheral decline.
Peripheral Retreat	The sharpest demographic losses occur in **rural belts and marginal peripheries**. These areas face consistent youth outmigration, low birth rates, vacant housing, and service withdrawal. Peripheral retreat is both a symptom and a cause of territorial imbalance.	Rural Abruzzo; Po Valley fringes; hinterlands of Sicily and Basilicata.	Produces **empty landscapes**: abandoned houses, unused infrastructures, shrinking labour markets. Intensifies dependency on urban cores. Requires **targeted place-based interventions** (SNAI, Borghi Plan), though effectiveness remains uneven.
Intermediate Areas (Italia di Mezzo focus)	Towns that are **neither metropolitan cores nor deep peripheries**, yet show persistent decline. Historically central to Italy's urban system, they now struggle to maintain symbolic and functional roles. They are often overlooked in current policies that focus either on big cities or remote peripheries.	Provinces of Biella and Vercelli (Piedmont); inner Tuscany, Umbria, and Marche; Enna in Sicily.	Represent the **critical laboratory for resilience**. Policies must combine heritage renewal with infrastructural connectivity. Without new frameworks, these areas risk becoming the "blind spot" of Italian territorial policy.

Table 3.1 Matrix of Shrinkage Dimensions in Italy

3.3 Identifying Clusters of Shrinkage

To go beyond descriptive statistics, spatial autocorrelation analysis (Local Moran's I) was employed. This method detects areas where similar values of population change cluster together, revealing cold spots, contiguous zones where demographic contraction is spatially reinforced.

Results indicate that many of the shrinking provinces are part of significant cold spots, confirming that decline is not random but territorially embedded. The spatial clustering often coincides with inner provinces containing dense historic cores and peripheral mountain communities, underscoring the link between spatial marginality and systemic shrinkage.To understand the demographic dynamics across Italian territories, population data was analyzed at the commune level, focusing on both absolute population change and spatial distribution patterns. This allowed for the identification of clusters of demographic behavior, revealing where population is concentrated versus where it has sprawled or declined.

Through spatial clustering methods like Local Moran's I, areas of concentrated decline were mapped and compared with heritage presence and service accessibility. This intersection of demographic vulnerability, territorial marginality, and cultural significance was pivotal in informing the site selection by identifying those communes that lie at the convergence of systematic shrinkage, inner peripherality, and conservation potential.

Cluster Type	Urban Space Interpretation	Typical Examples in Italian Context
High-High (HH)	Core zones of sustained population growth or economic vitality, where **high-growth areas cluster together**	Metropolitan centres **(e.g. Turin, Milan, Genova, Napoli)**, expanding urban cores, innovation districts
Low-High (LH)	Declining or marginal areas **surrounded by thriving neighbors**; urban pockets that contrast with their surroundings	Older neighborhoods near growing metropolises, inner-city decline zones adjacent to booming districts **(e.g. Rome and its periphery)**
Low-Low (LL)	Areas undergoing continuous population or economic decline, often spatially clustered	Shrinking inner towns, peripheral rural areas, "aree interne" with depopulation
High-Low (HL)	Growing or vibrant pockets located within broader areas of decline or stagnation; potential **urban revitalization hotspots**	Emerging suburban hubs, revitalized towns inside shrinking rural regions

Table 3.2 Local Moran's I spatial cluster indicators

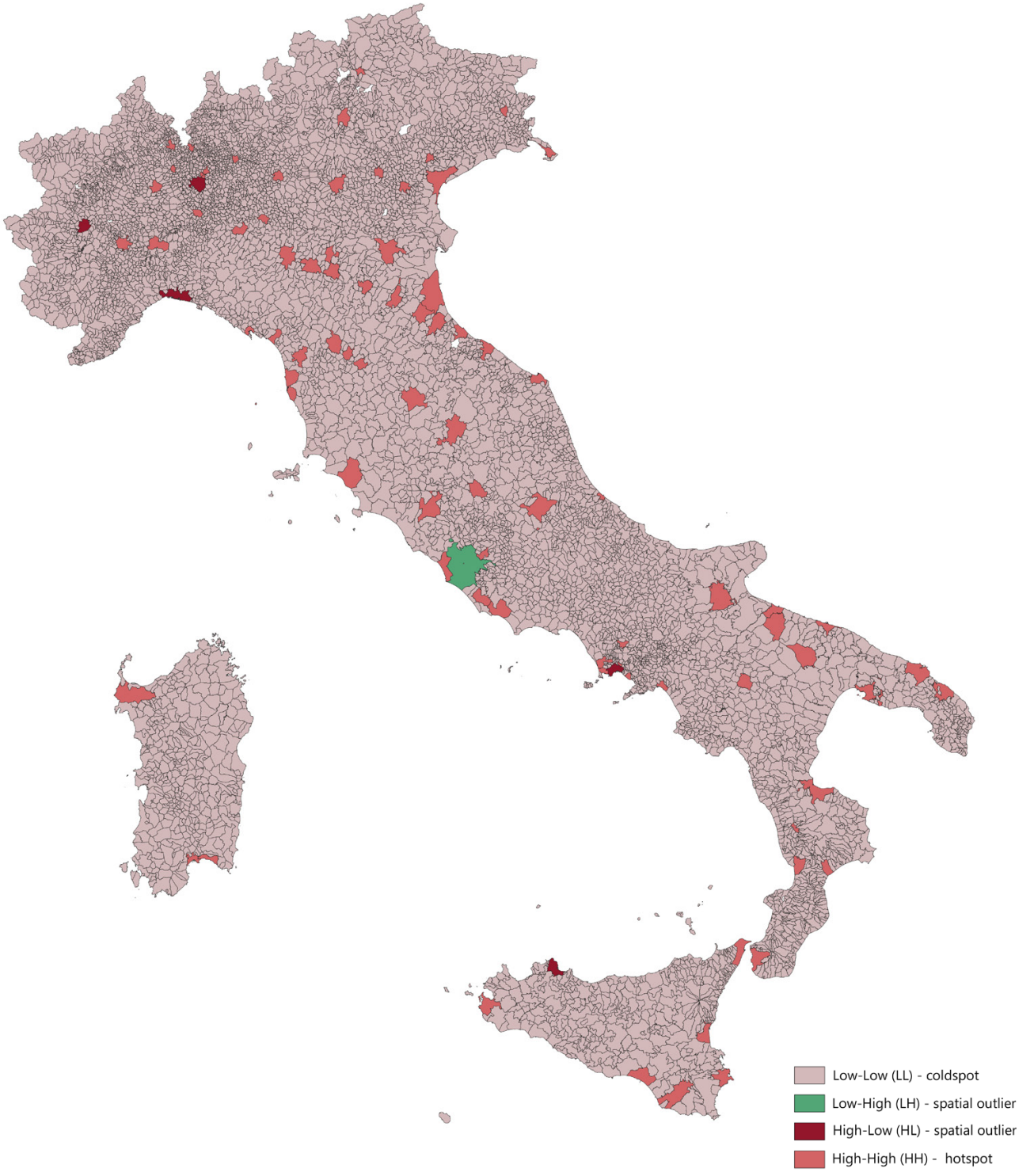


Fig 3.5 Local Moran's I spatial cluster map

Source: ISTAT Database

3.4 Demographic Change in Intermediate Territories

These figure illustrates the demographic trajectories of municipalities within Italia di Mezzo across three consecutive census intervals (1991-2001, 2001-2011, and 2011-2021), distinguishing between areas that have consistently gained population and those that have experienced continuous decline. Rather than presenting a homogeneous or stable condition, the map reveals a fragmented and polarized demographic landscape, where opposing trends coexist within the same territorial framework.

Municipalities that show population growth across all three periods are predominantly concentrated in northern and central-northern Italy, often located close to metropolitan regions or along well-connected infrastructural corridors. These areas tend to benefit from higher accessibility, more diversified economic structures, and spillover effects from larger urban systems. As a result, they are able to absorb demographic pressures and, in some cases, continue to attract population, even within a broader national context marked by demographic stagnation and ageing.

In contrast, municipalities experiencing persistent population loss are largely concentrated in southern Italy and inland territories, where geographic isolation, limited economic opportunities, and long-term outmigration reinforce shrinkage as a structural and ongoing condition. In these areas, population decline is not episodic or cyclical, but continuous over multiple decades, suggesting a deeper transformation of settlement patterns and local economies rather than a temporary demographic fluctuation.

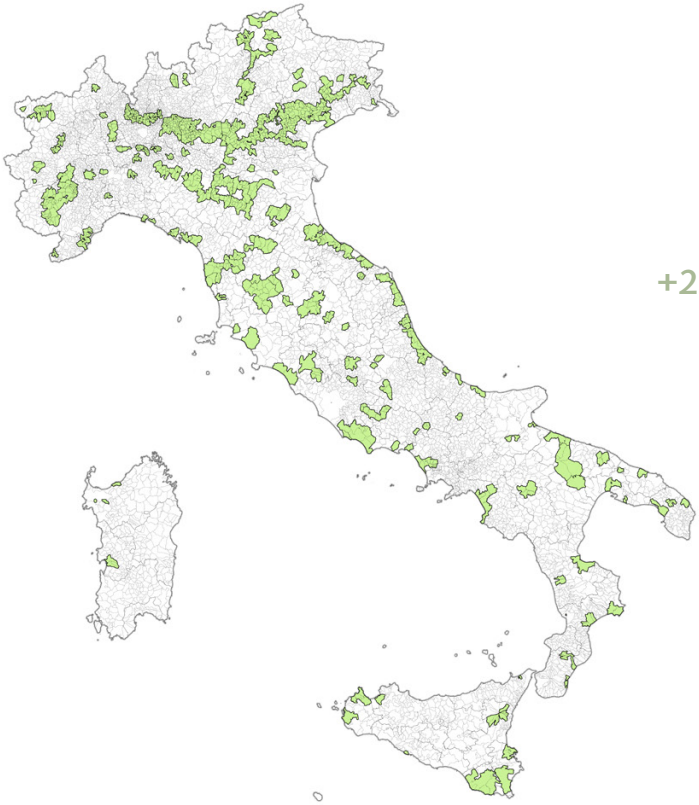
What emerges from this reading is an image of Italia di Mezzo as an internally differentiated territory, rather than a coherent or uniform macro region. **Growth and decline are not distributed evenly, but cluster spatially, producing pockets of relative resilience alongside areas of long term contraction.** This duality challenges simplified narratives that associate demographic decline exclusively with inner areas or marginal regions, and instead points to the need for more selective, place-based interpretations.

Within this framework, medium-sized cities experiencing long-term decline become particularly relevant. They are often embedded within broader territorial systems that still show signs of vitality, yet their historic centres struggle to retain population and everyday functions. The coexistence of expanding and shrinking municipalities within Italia di Mezzo therefore provides a critical analytical basis for focusing on provinces such as Agrigento, Avellino, Benevento, Caltanissetta, Campobasso, Cosenza, Enna, Foggia, Isernia, L'Aquila, in south and Biella in north where shrinkage is neither exceptional nor temporary, but part of a wider and uneven territorial transformation.

Three decades of Population change

Demographic analysis shows a persistent decline in many provinces, with cumulative losses often exceeding -10% and localized annual declines of over -1%.

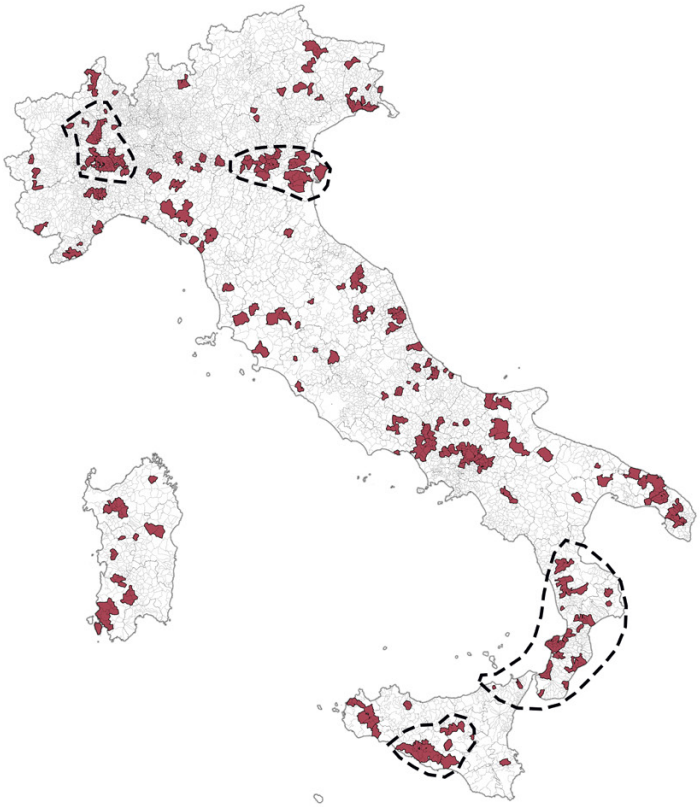
This demographic contraction is not evenly spread but follows historical, economic, and infrastructural fault lines, often mirroring the boundaries of provinces that were historically dependent on declining industries or agriculture.



Balance 1991-2021
+2.858.353 inhabitants

Source: Italia di mezzo: The emerging marginality of intermediate territories & ISTAT Database

Fig 3.6 Municipalities that have gained population in all three ranges (1991-2001, 2001-2011, 2011-2021)



Balance 1991-2021
-571.418 inhabitants

Source: Italia di mezzo: The emerging marginality of intermediate territories & ISTAT Database

Fig 3.7 Municipalities that have lost population in all three ranges (1991-2001, 2001-2011, 2011-2021)

3.5 Northern and Southern Belts of Shrinkage

Over the course of three decades, a distinct pattern emerges with the formation of two linear belts comprising provinces that have consistently experienced population decline across all periods.

Following the nodes with systematic decline in the past 3-4 decades and seeing the current decline rate in the current year as well, there is an overarching pattern in which the outmigration of populaion and population retraction follows two belts of provinces one in north and one of south.

These two belts gives us an idea of where the shrinking area is concentrated or where the most population outmigration are seen in overall italy. These belts are identified as the primary areas of interest for this research, serving as the focal zones for in-depth analysis.

The spatial clustering of decline reveals two significant linear belts:

- **A North Belt** encompassing provinces Alessandria, Biella, Genova, Savona and Vercelli

- **A South Belt with** Agrigento, Caltanissetta, Enna, Messina, Reggio di Calabria and Vibo Valentina

These belts emerge not as statistical artifacts but as historically and economically meaningful territories, illustrating how regional embeddedness of decline transcends local conditions. These two provinces will bethe focus of our study,

A North Belt

The economic past of this area is rooted in a strong industrial tradition, with textile production concentrated in Biella and Vercelli, port related industries and shipbuilding shaping the development of Genova, and a more diversified light industrial base in Alessandria.

Since the late 1970s and 1980s, however, these production systems have been progressively weakened by deindustrialization, automation, and the relocation of manufacturing activities, while suburbanization has accelerated population loss in historic urban cores. Today, the territory is characterized by an aging population and patterns of shrinkage that are most evident in medium- and small-sized cities, although overall economic resilience remains relatively higher due to proximity to dynamic metropolitan systems such as Turin and Milan, as well as the continued strategic role of Genoa's port.

Migration has partially mitigated demographic decline, with foreign immigrants replacing part of the lost population, but not at a scale sufficient to fully counterbalance long-term losses.

A South Belt

The economic past of these territories is predominantly agricultural, marked by limited industrialization and a long history of structural disadvantage. Unlike northern regions, their decline is not tied to industrial restructuring but to persistent marginalization, a weak productive base, chronic structural unemployment, and sustained waves of outmigration, particularly among younger populations moving toward northern Italy and abroad.

In the present condition, these areas exhibit more acute demographic ageing, enduring economic stagnation, and comparatively fragile infrastructure systems, with depopulation processes that are often continuous and deeper than those observed in the north. Migration dynamics are almost entirely characterized by internal and international outflows, with little to no compensatory inflows capable of stabilizing population loss.

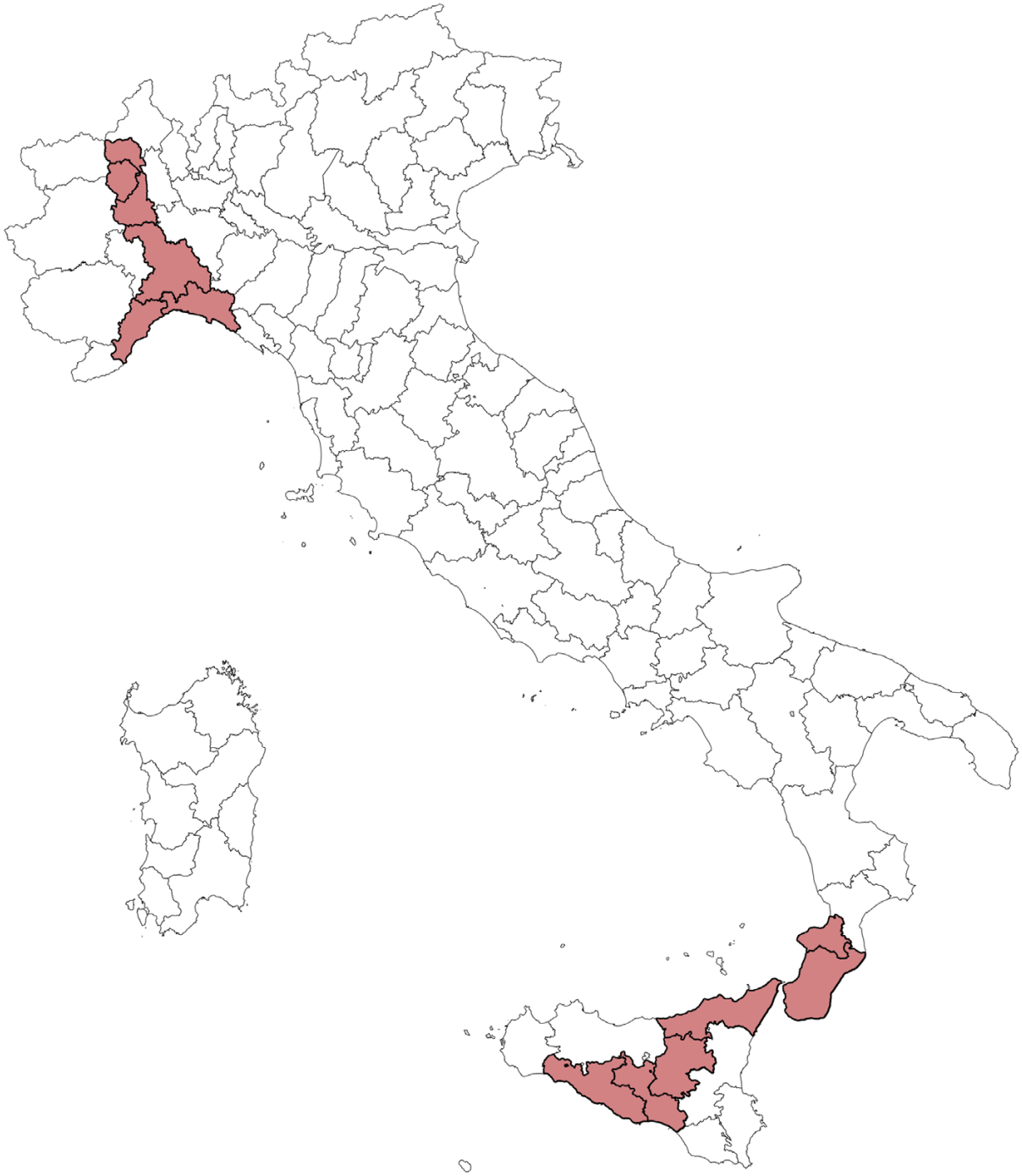
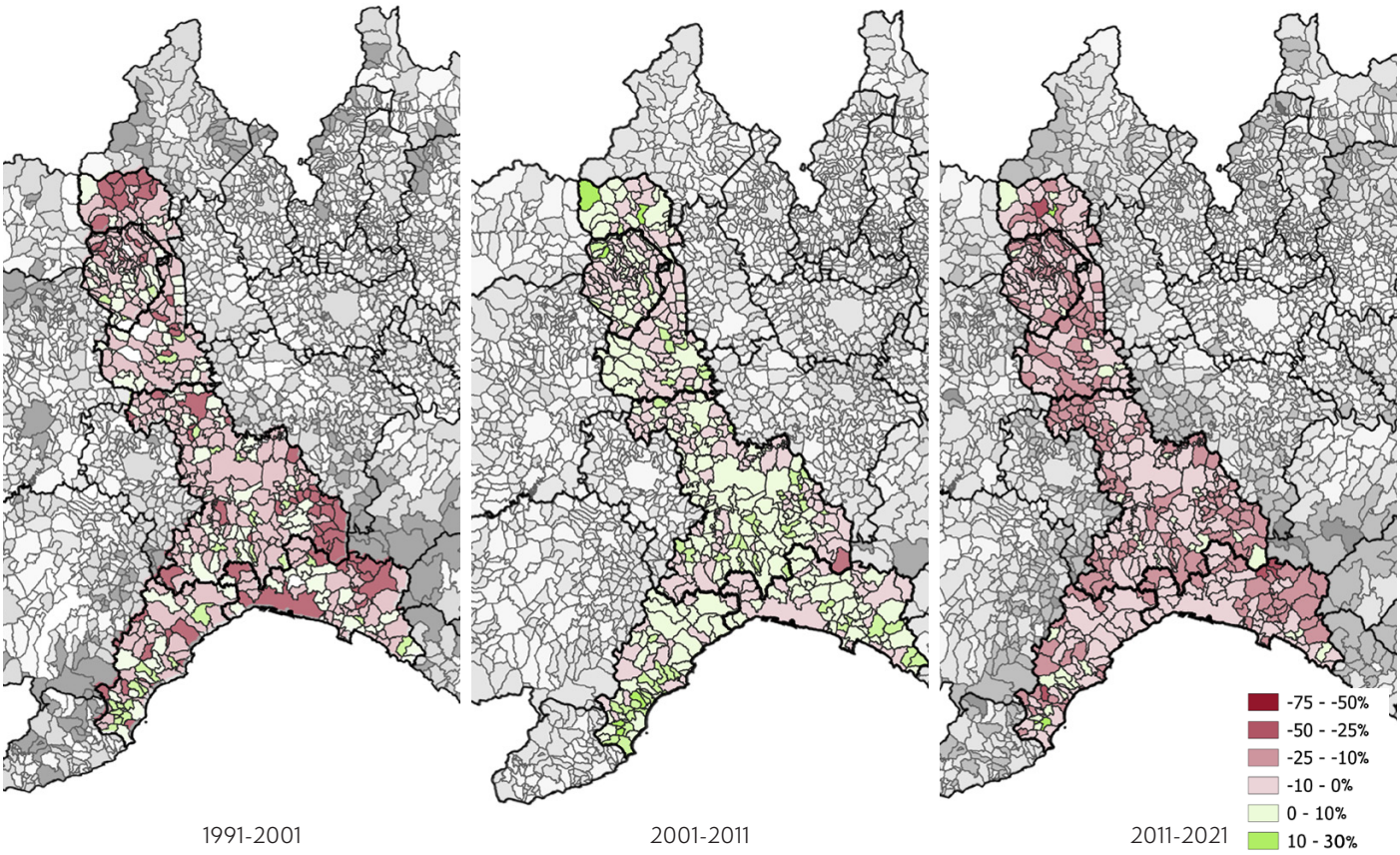


Fig 3.8 The North and South Belts of shrinkage

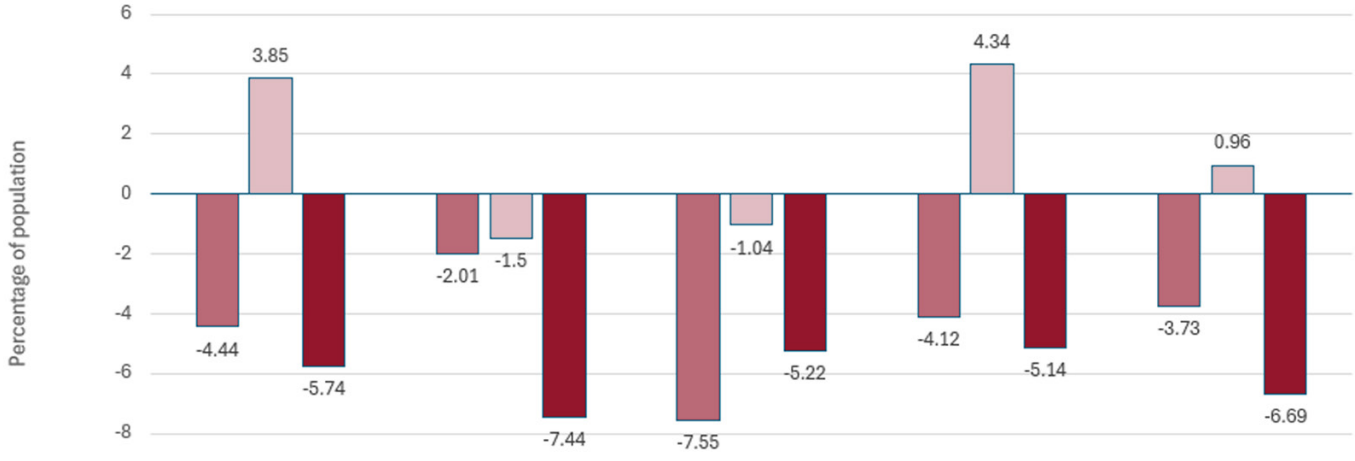
Demographic trend analysis of North Belt:



1991-2001 2001-2011 2011-2021

Fig 3.9 Demographic Trend in North Belt Source: ISTAT Database

An analysis of population change at the communal level across the three decadal intervals shows that many inner areas in the northern belt have been steadily losing people. Within this, the provinces of **Biella (-10.66%) ,Genova (-13.28%) and Vercelli (-9.46%)** stand out because their decline has been both persistent and pronounced in every period. This is not a temporary fluctuation but a systematic demographic decline that has carried on decade after decade, reshaping settlements, weakening local systems, and leaving cultural and infrastructural spaces underused. For this reason, Biella and Genova are particularly relevant for deeper investigation, as they show clearly how shrinkage in Northern Italy unfolds with lasting socio-spatial consequences.



	Alessandria	Biella	Genova	Savona	Vercelli
% 1991-2001	-4.44	-2.01	-7.55	-4.12	-3.73
% 2001-2011	3.85	-1.5	-1.04	4.34	0.96
% 2011-2021	-5.74	-7.44	-5.22	-5.14	-6.69

Table 3.3 Population Trend in North Belt from 1991-2021 Source: ISTAT Database

Demographic trend analysis of South Belt:

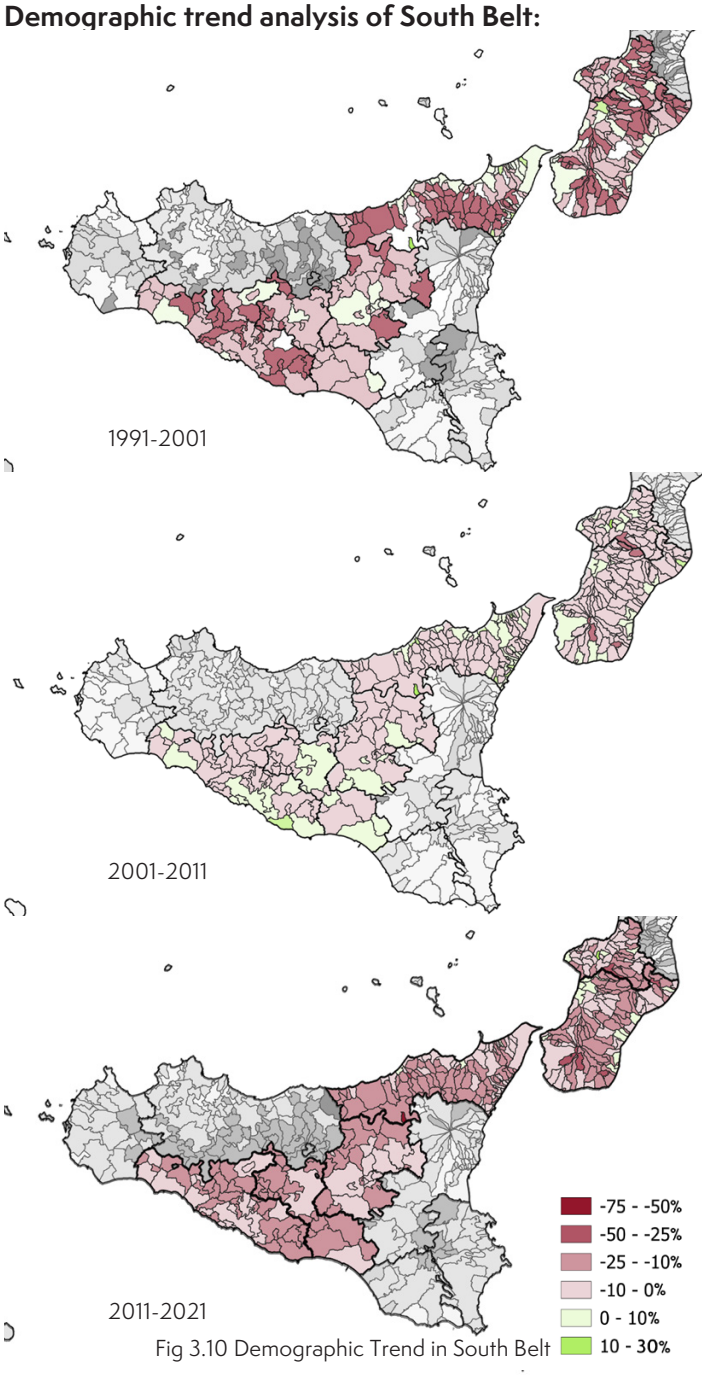
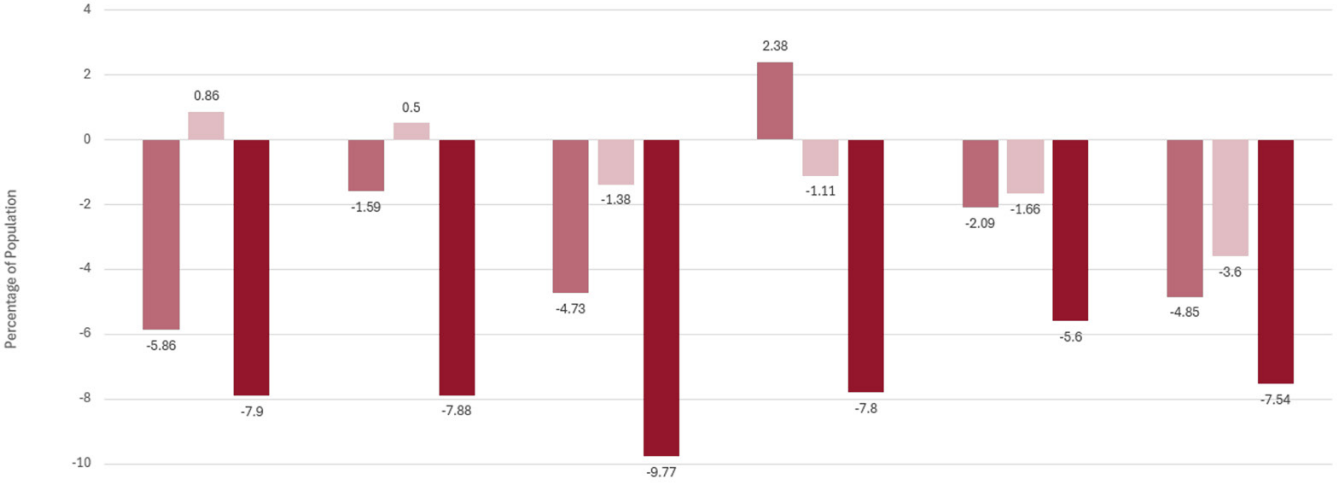


Fig 3.10 Demographic Trend in South Belt

When looking at the population change at the communal level across the southern belt over the three decadal intervals, it becomes clear that a large share of the inner areas in the northern part of this belt have been steadily losing inhabitants. Within this frame, the provinces of **Enna (-15.22%), Vibo Valentia (-15.19%), and Agrigento (-12.9%)** stand out because their decline has been not just occasional but persistent across each time period.

This tells us that what is happening here is not a short-term fluctuation or a temporary phase, but rather a systematic demographic decline that keeps unfolding decade after decade. The downward trend is steady enough to suggest that these provinces are caught in a long-term path of shrinkage, one that gradually reshapes their towns, economies, and everyday life.

In this sense, they represent important cases for a deeper look, since the loss of population here is closely tied to wider socio-spatial consequences: weakening local systems, underused public services, and the slow abandonment of both built and cultural landscapes. These provinces are not just examples of decline—they are living laboratories of shrinkage in Southern Italy, where the effects are felt in ways that are structural and ongoing.



	Agrigento	Caltanissetta	Enna	Messina	Reggio di Calabria	Vibo Valentia
% 1991-2001	-5.86	-1.59	-4.73	2.38	-2.09	-4.85
% 2001-2011	0.86	0.5	-1.38	-1.11	-1.66	-3.6
% 2011-2021	-7.9	-7.88	-9.77	-7.8	-5.6	-7.54

Table 3.4 Population Trend in South Belt from 1991-2021

Source: ISTAT Database

3.6 Heritage Within Shrinking Territories

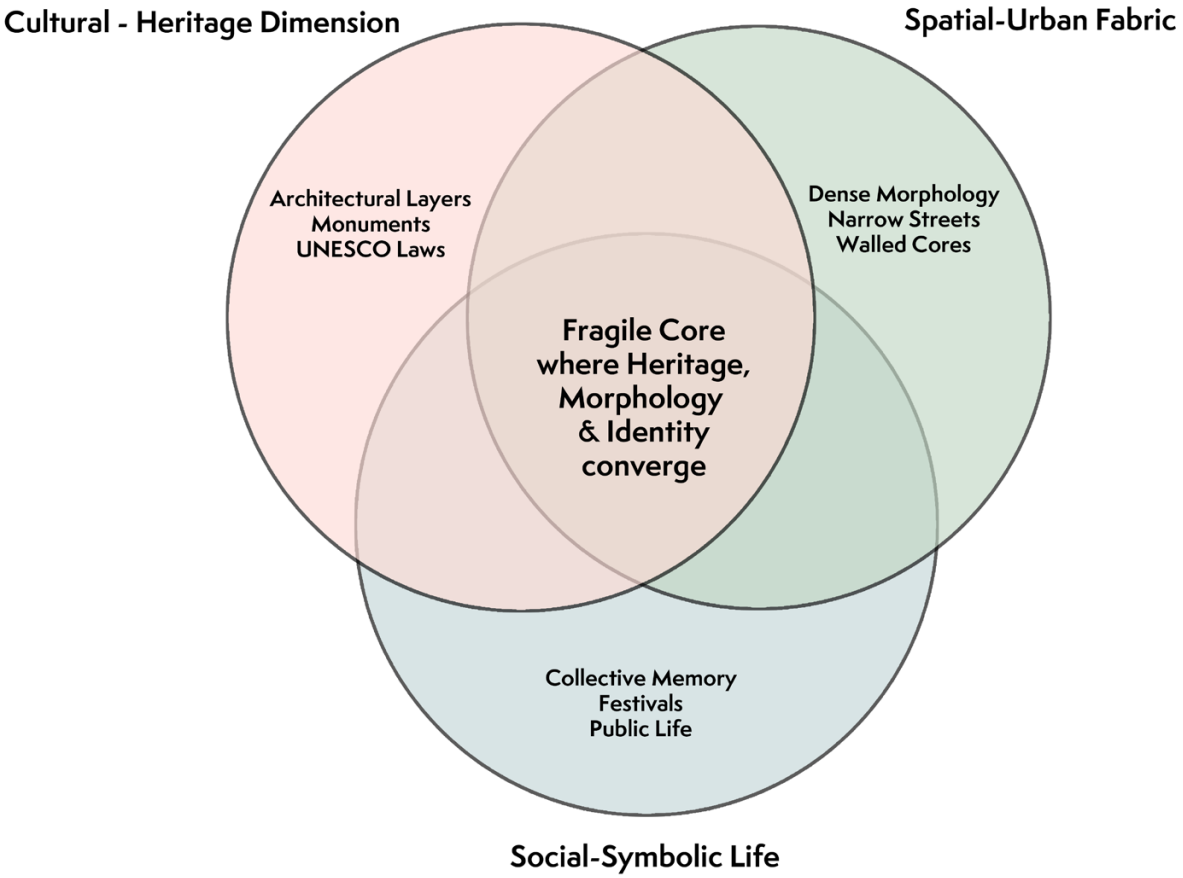


Fig 3.11 Italian Historic centers- Intersecting dimensions

Paradoxically, many cold spots of decline contain the richest concentrations of historic urban fabric: medieval town centers, religious complexes, industrial heritage, and layered vernacular architecture.

These historic centers, while symbolically powerful, face functional decline: underused housing, commercial closures, and limited capacity for maintenance. Yet, as Bonfantini and Agim Kercuku argue, these same centers hold latent potential for regeneration: they embody place identity, attract tourism, and can anchor adaptive reuse strategies that reconnect past and future.

A **historic center** (Italian: centro storico) refers to the oldest, often medieval or early modern, part of a city or town that has evolved over centuries and retains significant elements of architectural, urban, and cultural heritage. These areas typically feature dense urban fabric, narrow streets, historic buildings, religious sites, and public spaces that reflect the historical identity, social structure, and territorial continuity of the settlement. In Italy, historic centers are formally recognized for their cultural value and are often protected under national and regional heritage laws.

Planning and Regulation

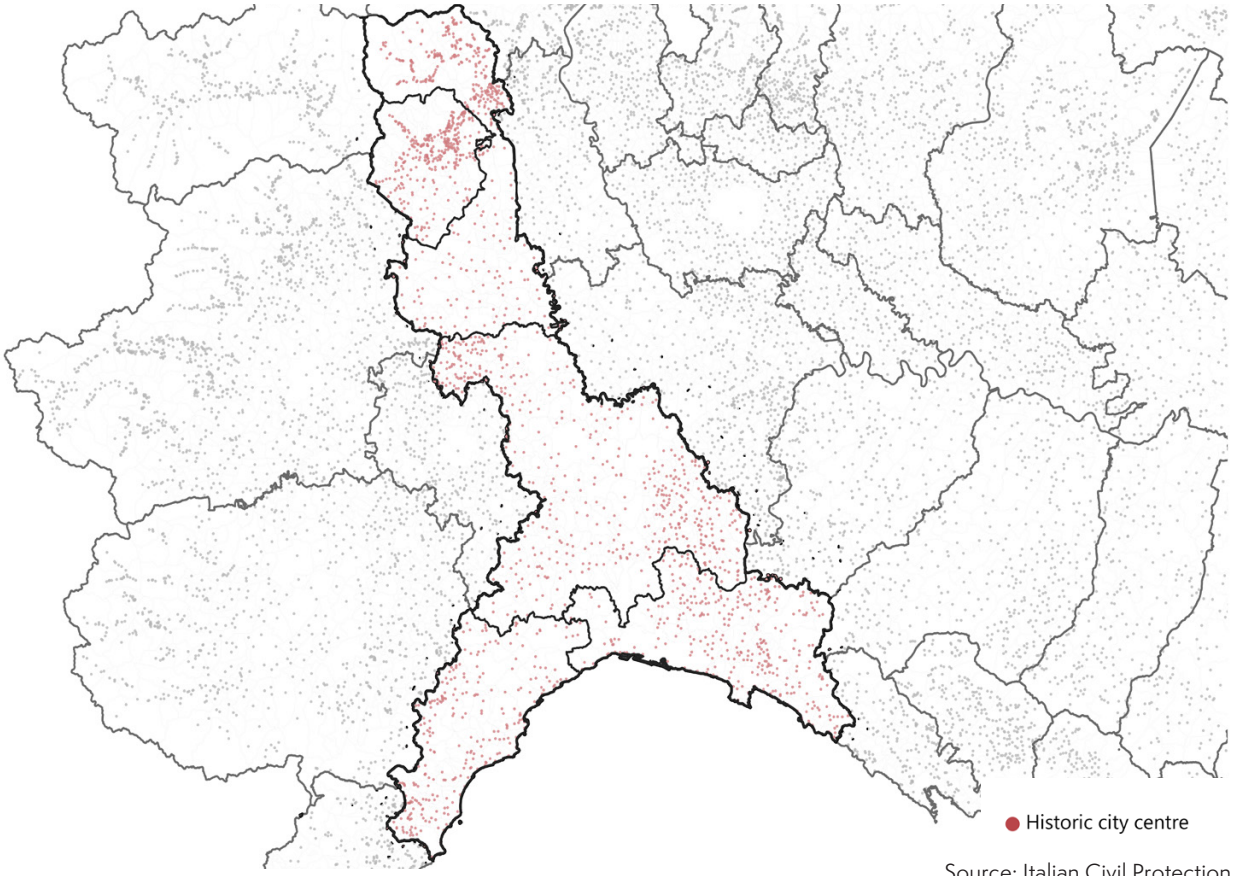
Within Italian statutory planning frameworks, historic centres are typically subject to more restrictive regulatory regimes, reflecting their cultural value, morphological integrity, and vulnerability to transformation. Demolition and new construction are heavily limited, while restoration and adaptive reuse are encouraged as tools to balance preservation with functionality. Vacant or underused buildings are often redirected toward cultural, artisanal, or small-scale touristic functions, ensuring vitality without undermining historic identity. In this sense, the *centro storico* becomes not just a physical conservation zone but also a regulatory space where urban policies safeguard the integrity of historic fabric while introducing compatible uses.

Heritage and Contemporary Life

These frameworks do not imagine the centro storico as a static museum, but as a living framework for regeneration. Energy retrofitting, accessibility improvements, and ecological measures are introduced where possible, provided they remain coherent with traditional forms and materials (Lucchi & Pracchi, 2020). In this way, the centro storico plays a dual role: on one hand, it is the symbolic anchor of identity and memory, while on the other, it becomes a strategic driver for revitalisation, especially in shrinking towns where historic fabric is both fragile and full of potential (Haase et al., 2014; Crisci et al., 2014).

Each polygon in the map on the following page corresponds to a historic center, which is considered the elementary unit for territorial and risk assessments. These include traditional town centers, nuclei of historical settlements, and other special localities. The dataset provides detailed geographical characterization, including location, boundaries, and associated attributes such as the name of the center, ISTAT code, and type of locality.

North Belt:



Source: Italian Civil Protection

Fig 3.12 Presence of Historic centre - North belt

Historic Centres in the Northern Belt

The map of historic centres in the northern belt shows a dense and articulated distribution of medium-sized cities, often aligned along infrastructural corridors and proximity to metropolitan regions. In this context, historic centres are frequently embedded within territorial systems that continue to display demographic resilience or selective growth, even when individual municipalities experience population decline.

Qualitative fieldwork, including site visits and on-site observation, reveals that many of these historic centres remain physically intact and functionally connected to wider urban networks However, shrinkage manifests in more subtle and uneven ways, often through the loss of everyday functions, declining residential density, and competition with peripheral or newly developed areas. Rather than being abandoned, historic centres in the northern belt tend to lose centrality within otherwise functioning cities.

This spatial condition produces a specific form of shrinkage: one where historic centres coexist with broader territorial vitality, yet struggle to maintain their role as lived urban cores. The northern belt thus illustrates how proximity to metropolitan systems like towards Milan. Turinn can mitigate overall decline without necessarily preventing the gradual weakening of historic centres. This pattern is particularly relevant for post-industrial cities such as Biella, where demographic and economic restructuring affects historic fabrics in selective and spatially differentiated ways.

South Belt:



Fig 3.13 Presence of Historic centre - South belt

Source: Italian Civil Protection

Historic Centres in the Southern Belt

In contrast, the map of historic centres in the southern belt reveals a more fragmented and dispersed pattern, strongly associated with inland territories and long-term population loss. Here, historic centres are often located within municipalities that have experienced continuous decline across multiple decades, with limited compensatory dynamics from surrounding regions.

In these contexts, shrinkage is more pervasive and structural, affecting not only individual neighbourhoods but the city as a whole. Historic centres remain physically present and symbolically significant, yet increasingly detached from everyday urban life. Based on the collective insights gathered through conversations with residents across these provinces, Population ageing, housing vacancy, and the closure of basic services contribute to a progressive thinning of social and functional activity.

Unlike the northern belt, where decline is often selective, the southern belt illustrates a condition where historic centres are embedded in territories that lack strong external drivers of regeneration. This reinforces a form of shrinkage that is slower but deeper, and more difficult to reverse through conventional growth-oriented or heritage-led strategies. Cities such as Enna exemplify this condition, where the historic centre persists as a cultural anchor, but faces increasing challenges in sustaining permanent inhabitation and daily use.

3.7 From Territorial Analysis to Case Selection

The territorial analysis demonstrates that shrinkage in Italy is spatially concentrated within two broad belts of demographic contraction, one in the North and one in the South. **These belts are not peripheral in a purely geographic sense, but structurally intermediate.** They are composed of medium-sized towns with historic centres that retain morphological continuity and symbolic centrality, yet experience sustained population loss, ageing, and progressive functional thinning.

Within these territories, shrinkage does not manifest as total abandonment. Instead, **it appears through selective underuse, service withdrawal, commercial vacancy, and the weakening of everyday urban intensity within intact historic fabrics.** The spatial clustering and demographic indicators confirm that this **condition is neither isolated nor episodic, but part of a long-term structural trajectory affecting intermediate towns** across different regional contexts.

The selection of **Enna** and **Biella** emerges directly from this reading. Positioned within the southern and northern belts respectively, they **operate as two differentiated yet comparable experimental grounds**. Both present the convergence of demographic fragility, service marginality, and concentrated heritage fabric, but they express these conditions through distinct spatial and institutional configurations. Enna reflects advanced contraction within a topographically constrained historic core with strong institutional anchors. Biella illustrates post-industrial restructuring and commercial retraction within a compact urban fabric embedded in a more diversified regional system.

By selecting one case from each belt, the research establishes a **comparative platform that allows shrinkage to be examined under varied socio-economic and morphological conditions.** These cases function not as isolated examples, but as calibrated testing grounds where spatial analysis and strategic actions can be developed in direct relation to local specificities.

The intention is not to produce two fixed masterplans, but to experiment with area specific interventions that respond to the precise conditions identified in each context. Through this process, the research extracts transferable principles that can later be adapted and tailored to other medium-sized towns experiencing similar forms of contraction. In this way, the case studies translate territorial diagnosis into grounded action, while simultaneously informing a broader strategic framework capable of operating beyond the selected sites.

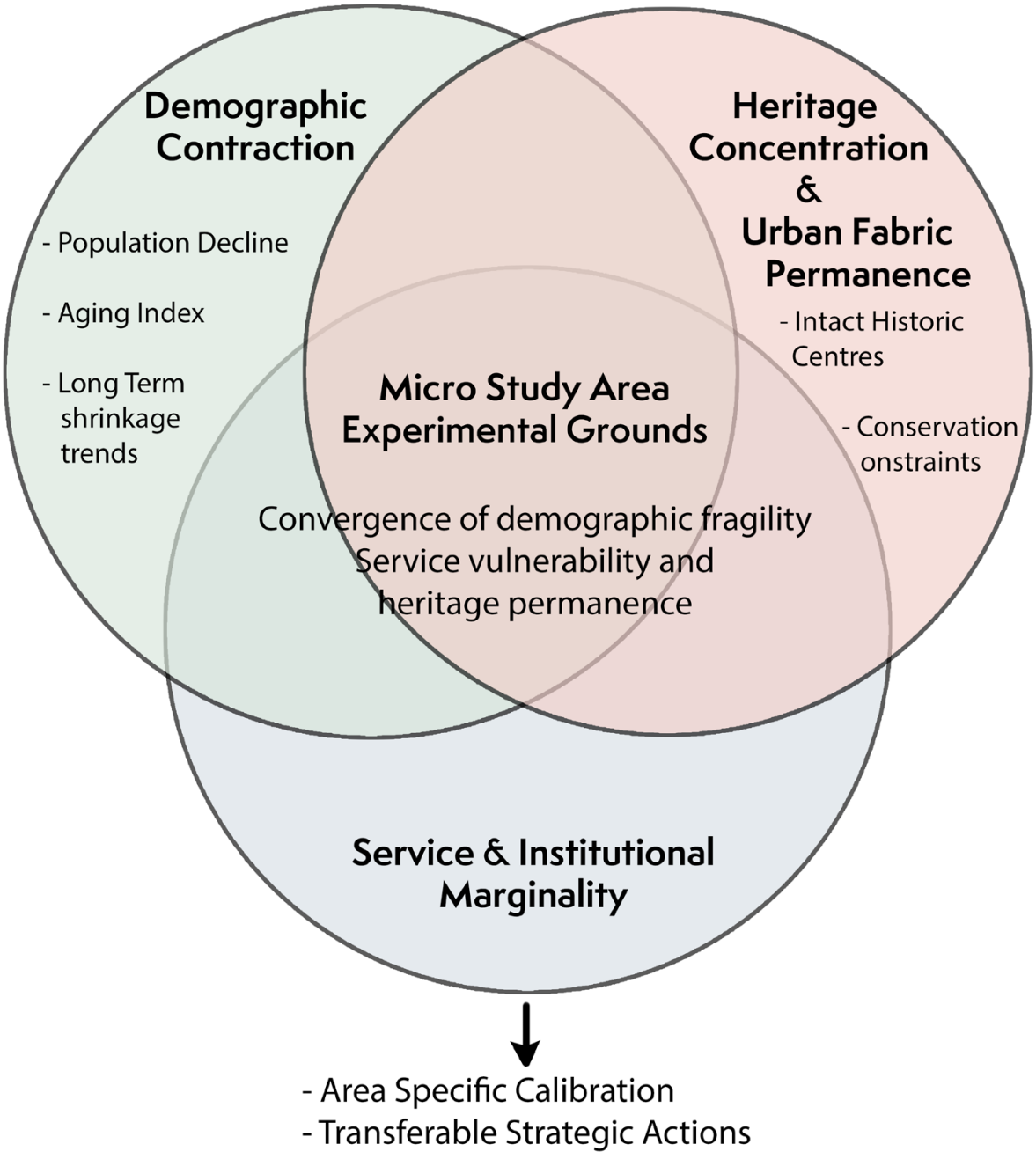


Fig 3.14 Convergence of Structural Fragilities





Chapter IV

Enna and Biella as Comparative Case Studies

4.1 Selecting Case Studies from Territorial Patterns

Patterns of demographic decline in Italy are not randomly distributed, but form recognisable spatial configurations shaped by geography, accessibility, and historical development. Population loss tends to concentrate in specific territorial belts, where medium-sized towns and historic settlements occupy increasingly fragile positions within wider regional systems. When read alongside urban morphology and heritage concentration, demographic trends reveal a growing mismatch between built form and contemporary patterns of habitation. Shrinkage, in this sense, becomes visible not through collapse, but through underuse, vacancy, and the gradual thinning of everyday life within spaces that were built for denser and more intense forms of occupation.

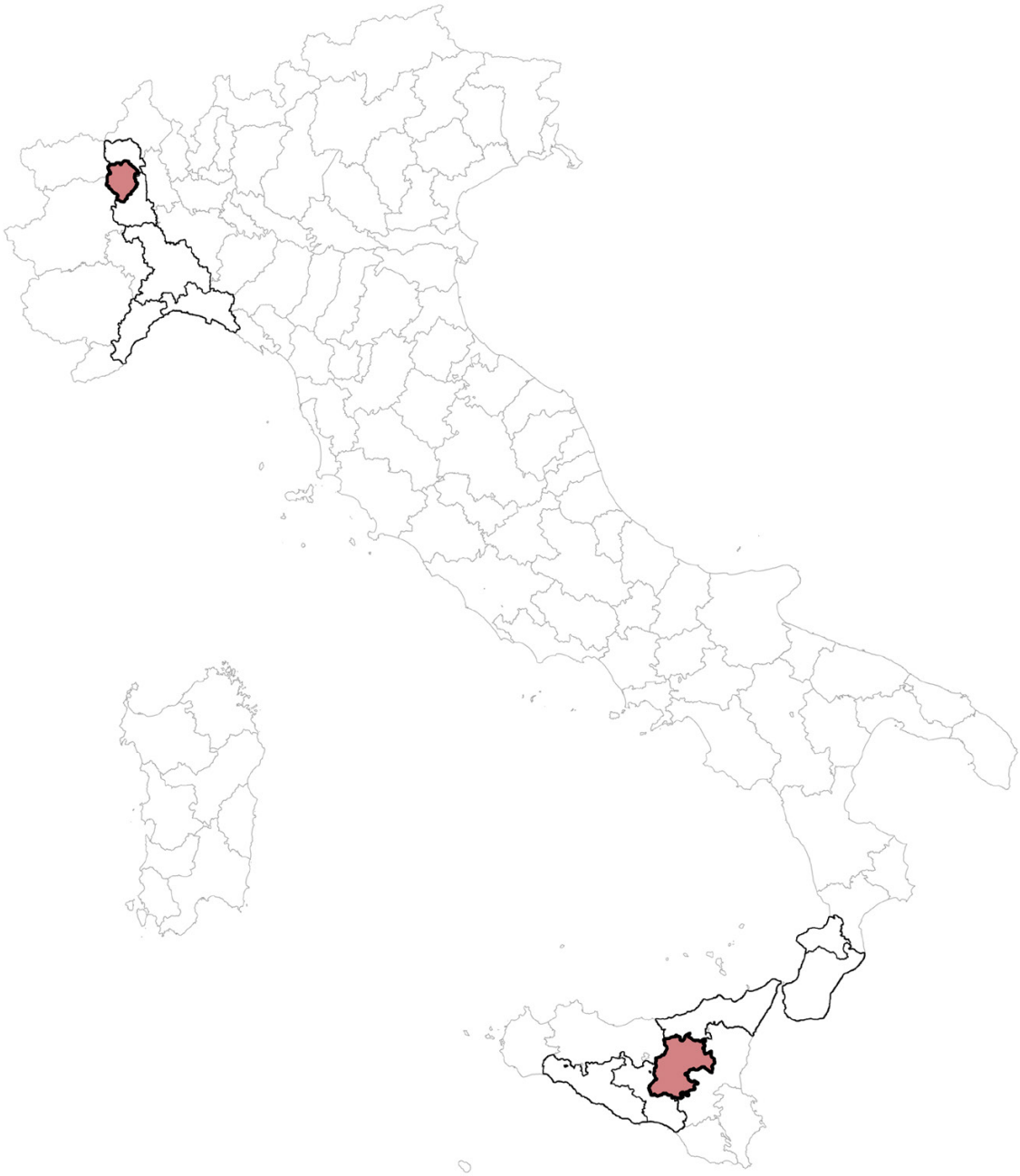


Fig 4.1 Selected provinces for Micro Study

While all provinces within the identified North and South belts have experienced notable population loss over the past three decades, this research specifically focuses on areas exhibiting a pattern of systematic decline defined as a consistent and uninterrupted decrease in population across all three decadal intervals (1991-2001, 2001-2011, and 2011-2021).

Identification of High-Potential Areas for Intervention

A structured framework identifies high-potential case study areas for urban shrinkage analysis in Italy, integrating demographic, spatial, and heritage criteria to select liminal territories poised for strategic intervention.

Core Diagnostic Criteria,

- Consistent demographic decline over the past three decades,
- Absence of significant metropolitan or large-scale urban spaces,
- Spatial correlation patterns characterized predominantly by cold spots, and
- The presence of a historically significant urban core.

High-Potential Intervention Attributes

- Presence of underutilized but culturally significant built heritage
- Proximity to infrastructural or ecological corridors
- Existing (but weakening) civic institutions or traditions
- Partial engagement with national/regional regeneration frameworks

These intermediate territories, caught between abandonment and possibility, demand calibrated, site-specific strategies of adaptive reuse, landscape restoration, and community activation to transform structural fragility into stewardship opportunities without growth dependency.

Applying this criterion of continuous depopulation narrows the scope of investigation to the following provinces:

The North Belt

Biella: Once a European textile hub, now affected by industrial decommissioning, aging population, and depopulation in alpine valleys. Heritage assets include industrial mills, religious sanctuaries like Oropa, and traditional alpine architecture.

This province illustrate shrinkage beyond southern Italy, highlighting regional heterogeneity and the limits of economic wealth as protection against retraction.

The South Belt

Enna: Sicily's only landlocked province, marked by steep decline in historic hill towns, service erosion, and high aging index. Efforts like €1 homes show awareness but struggle with structural fragility.

These territories combine geographic remoteness with underinvestment, forming what Lanzani & Renzoni call double marginality.

Why Biella and Enna Together

Biella and Enna are not selected as comparable cases in the conventional sense, nor as examples of successful intervention. Instead, they are chosen to explore how similar processes of shrinkage affect medium-sized historic centres under different territorial conditions within Middle Italy. While the two provinces differ in geographic position, economic history, and institutional context, they share a set of structural characteristics that make them particularly relevant for this research.

Biella represents a northern, post-industrial context, where demographic decline follows the contraction of traditional manufacturing activities and is addressed through fragmented and often growth-oriented regeneration initiatives. Enna, by contrast, reflects an inland southern condition, characterised by long-term demographic contraction, institutional continuity, and limited spatial transformation. Their pairing is therefore intentional: rather than comparing outcomes, the research uses these cases to test whether a shared analytical and strategic framework can remain valid across divergent contexts.

Converging Conditions of Shrinkage

Despite their different trajectories, Biella and Enna show a strong convergence in the way shrinkage manifests within their historic centres. In both cases, population decline is persistent and long-term, accompanied by ageing populations and the gradual weakening of everyday urban functions. The historic centres remain largely intact from a physical and heritage perspective, yet they are increasingly affected by vacancy, underuse, and the loss of residential and service functions.

Accessibility constraints and peripheral positioning further reinforce this condition. Both provinces occupy marginal positions with respect to major urban networks, limiting functional integration with stronger growth areas and contributing to continued outmigration. Shrinkage, in this sense, does not appear as a sudden collapse, but as a slow process of functional erosion.

Policy Positioning and Analytical Relevance

At the policy level, Biella and Enna occupy a similar position within existing national and regional frameworks. They are neither metropolitan centres prioritised by growth-oriented agendas, nor small villages fully addressed by inner-area or emergency policies. As a result, shrinkage is often recognised indirectly but rarely governed through dedicated spatial strategies.

In Biella, planning approaches tend to remain embedded within regeneration narratives that assume recovery through selective projects. In Enna, policy engagement focuses primarily on protection and conservation, with limited attention to adaptation and everyday use. Although these approaches differ, both struggle to respond to shrinkage as a long-term structural condition affecting the historic centre.

Towards the Micro-Scale Study Area

Taken together, Biella and Enna provide representative contexts for examining how shrinkage, heritage, accessibility, and policy gaps intersect in medium-sized historic centres. They are not used to illustrate solutions, but to clarify conditions. Their selection supports a shift from descriptive diagnosis toward the testing of strategic frameworks for governing long-term decline at the scale of the historic centre.

Criteria	Biella	Enna
Difficulties		
Demographic Trend	Long-term population loss and ageing	Ongoing population loss and ageing
Accessibility & Connectivity	Limited connections to major urban networks	Limited connections to major urban networks
Service Provision	Reduced availability of everyday services	Reduced availability of everyday services
Policy & Funding Presence	Occasional and fragmented policy attention	Limited and discontinuous policy attention
Socio-economic Conditions	Persistent economic fragility and social vulnerability	Persistent economic fragility and social vulnerability
Opportunities		
Heritage-led Regeneration Potential	Strong scope for reuse and adaptation of historic assets	Strong scope for reuse and adaptation of historic assets
Heritage Richness	Dense and layered historic fabric	Dense and layered historic fabric

Table 4.1 Crossroad of selected site criteria

Together, Biella and Enna do not illustrate solutions, but conditions. Their selection allows shrinkage to be analysed as a structural planning challenge affecting medium-sized historic centres across Italy, rather than as a regional anomaly.

4.2 Framing Enna and Biella as Comparative Cases

Region I: Enna

The only landlocked province in Sicily, known as the "navel" of the island.

Demographic Decline

- Enna has one of the highest depopulation rates in Sicily and Italy overall.
- Youth outmigration and low birth rates have hollowed out many of its historic hilltop towns (e.g., Pietraperzia, Assoro, Troina).

Urban Retraction & Heritage

- Towns in Enna are spatially "overbuilt" relative to their current population.
- Many historic centers have large stocks of abandoned or underused housing, a major concern in your thesis on urban retraction.
- This makes Enna ideal for discussing adaptive reuse, heritage-led regeneration, or even controlled contraction (ritiro urbano).

Territorial Marginalization

- Enna exemplifies what Lanzani & Renzoni call the "internal fragmentation" of Italy: socially and infrastructurally disconnected territories.
- Scarce public transport, poor digital connectivity, and limited access to services all typical markers of territorial fragility.

Case for Resilience & Revitalization

- Some towns, like Troina, are experimenting with €1 homes and strategic plans to attract new residents or remote workers.
- These attempts tie into your thesis themes of revitalization through place-based policies and resilient planning.

Time	1991	1995	2001	2005	2011	2015	2021	2024	1991-2001	2001-2011	2011-2021
Enna	28273	28366	28983	28502	27979	27876	26037	25332	2.51	-3.46	-6.94
Piazza Armerina	22355	22352	21038	21296	22213	21649	20749	20619	-5.89	5.59	-6.59
Nicosia	15029	14979	14812	14779	14502	14038	12947	12594	-1.44	-2.09	-10.72
Leonforte	15147	14930	14145	14043	13957	13550	12583	12191	-6.62	-1.33	-9.84
Barrafranca	13667	13686	13115	13293	13983	13369	12063	11664	-4.04	6.62	-13.73
Troina	10406	10369	10061	9893	9686	9428	8699	8405	-3.32	-3.73	-10.19
Agira	9150	9062	8348	8285	8494	8323	7756	7632	-8.77	1.75	-8.69
Valguarnera Caropepe	9171	9094	8649	8488	8258	7876	7163	6846	-5.69	-4.52	-13.26
Regalbuto	7981	7993	7744	7709	7497	7252	6830	6626	-2.97	-3.19	-8.9
Pietraperzia	8015	7890	7340	7303	7281	7048	6459	6315	-8.42	-0.8	-11.29
Centuripe	6612	6511	5903	5782	5649	5498	5172	5011	-10.72	-4.3	-8.44
Assoro	5319	5410	5393	5376	5385	5217	4892	4776	1.39	-0.15	-9.16
Catenanuova	5073	5097	4876	4933	5029	4881	4519	4454	-3.88	3.14	-10.14
Villarosa	6205	6208	5696	5524	5283	4997	4496	4288	-8.2	-7.25	-14.9
Aidone	7275	7116	6057	5428	5074	4847	4389	4208	-16.74	-16.23	-13.5
Calascibetta	5014	4952	4829	4751	4677	4570	4169	4029	-3.69	-3.15	-10.86
Gagliano Castelferrato	4173	4107	3772	3756	3738	3608	3368	3201	-9.61	-0.9	-9.9
Nissoria	3152	3204	3014	2898	2999	3011	2849	2833	-4.38	-0.5	-5
Cerami	3100	2981	2462	2318	2186	2074	1859	1857	-20.58	-11.21	-14.96
Sperlinga	1065	1017	963	938	891	810	691	675	-9.58	-7.48	-22.45

Table 4.2 Population Trend of Enna

Source: ISTAT Database

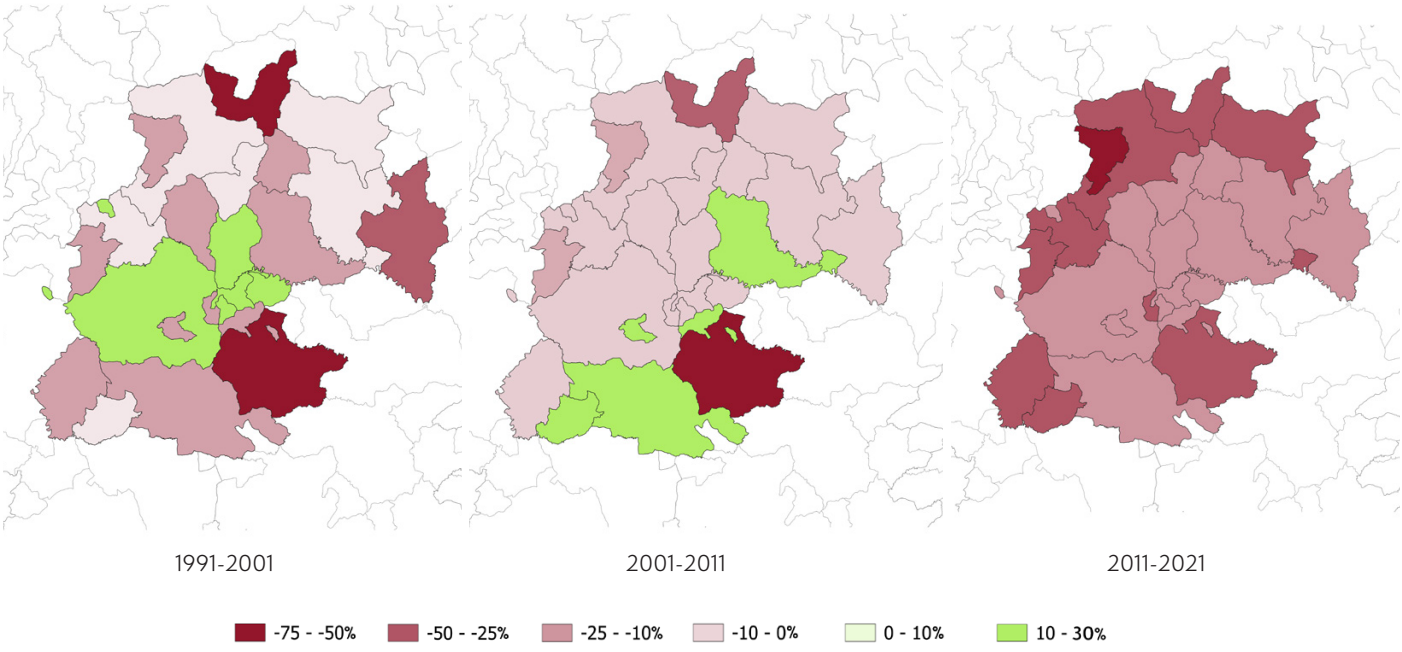
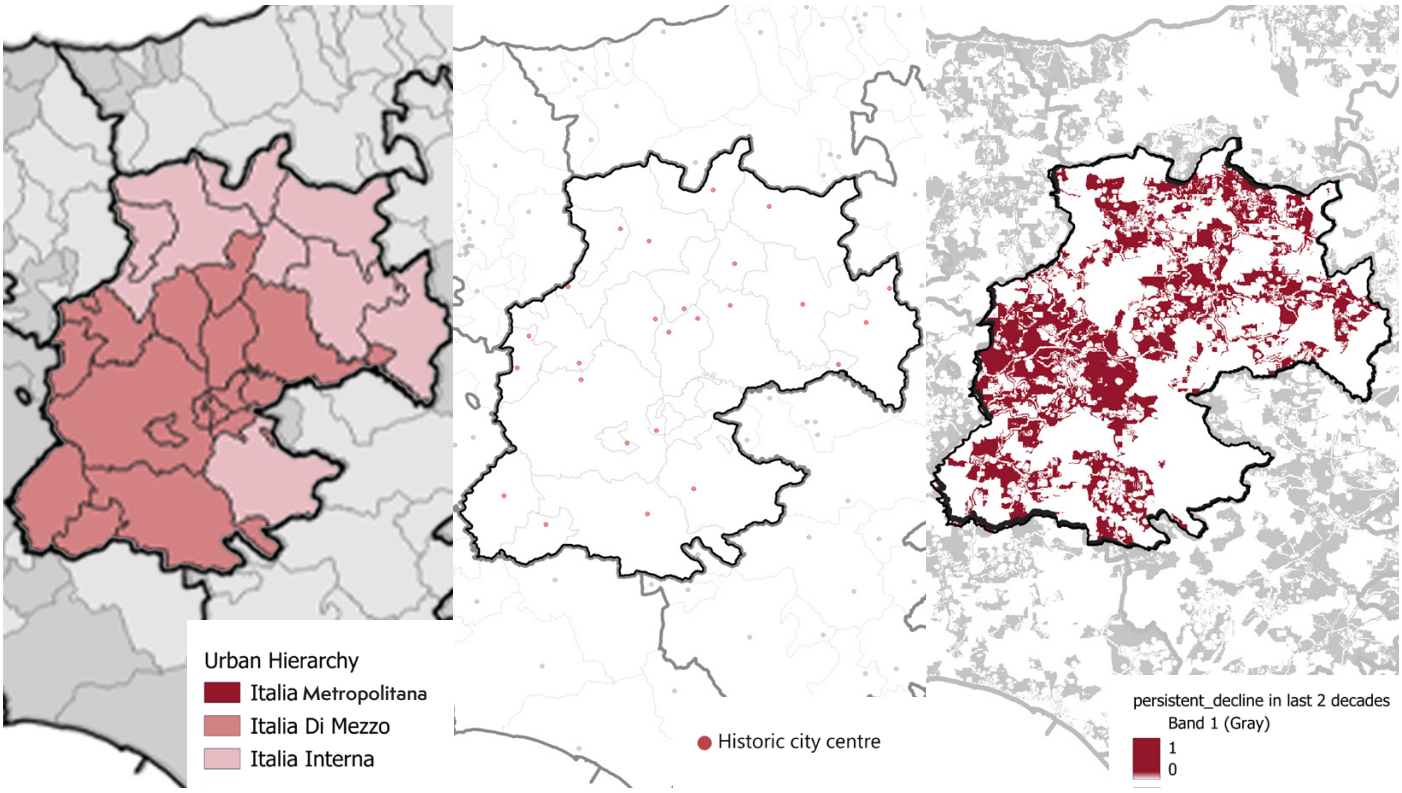


Fig 4.2 Shrinkage in Enna through years 1991-2021

Source: ISTAT Database

Enna Demographic Trends from 1991-2021



Urban Hierarchy | Historic centre presence | Persistent Population decline

Fig 4.3 Indicators for Shrinkage in Enna

Source: ISTAT Database

Region II : Piedmont - Province of Biella

Population: ~170,000 (Biella city ~44,000; most others in decline, especially alpine and pre-alpine municipalities)

Geography: Located at the foothills of the Alps, Biella is characterized by a transition from urbanized lowlands to isolated mountain valleys (notably Valle Cervo, Valle Elvo, and Valle Sessera). The terrain is rugged, forested, and includes glacial lakes, terraced slopes, and old transhumance routes.

Key Issues of Biella:

- Severe demographic shrinkage (some villages with <50 residents)
- Aging population and youth outmigration
- Heritage under threat: rural sanctuaries, old mills, traditional baite (alpine huts), and terraced landscapes are deteriorating
- Loss of local craft traditions: especially in wool processing, stone masonry, and woodwork
- Inaccessibility and harsh winters worsen isolation and limit tourism potential

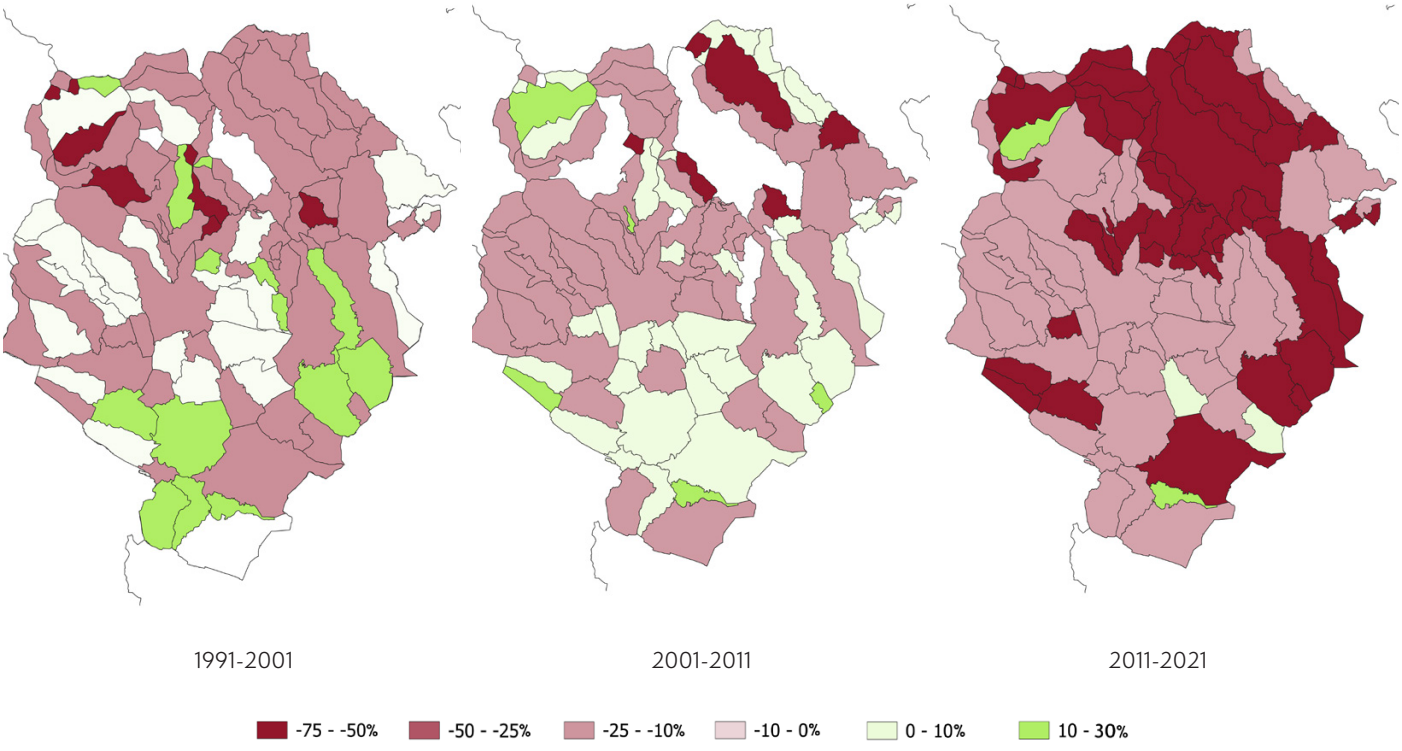
Cultural & Landscape Heritage:

- **Wool and textile heritage:** Biella was once a major hub for Italian wool; old mills, workers' villages, and factory buildings (e.g., Lanificio Zegna) now face underuse.
- **Religious and spiritual heritage:** Shrines like Santuario di Oropa (UNESCO tentative list) are major landmarks, but smaller religious buildings in mountain zones are neglected.
- **Transhumance routes and terracing:** Abandoned but visible in the landscape; some revival projects are being attempted.

Area	Pop 1991	Pop 2001	Pop 2011	Pop 2021	1991-2001	2001-2011	2011-2021
Biella	48324	45815	44726	42943	-5.19	-1.68	-3.99
Cossato	15321	15250	14881	14070	-0.46	-2.42	-5.45
Vigliano Biellese	8286	8421	8354	7618	1.63	-0.80	-8.81
Candelo	7697	7764	8026	7356	0.87	3.37	-8.35
Occhieppo Inferiore	4194	3980	4002	3777	-5.10	0.55	-5.62
Ponderano	3696	3848	4006	3733	4.11	4.11	-6.81
Mongrando	4020	4036	3981	3715	0.40	-1.36	-6.68
Gaglianico	3934	3872	3919	3710	-1.58	1.21	-5.33
Cavaglià	3612	3703	3616	3537	2.52	-2.35	-2.18
Andorno Micca	3681	3569	3466	3027	-3.04	-2.89	-12.67
Cerrione	2628	2773	2929	2802	5.52	5.63	-4.34
Lessona	2301	2437	2852	2642	5.91	17.03	-7.36
Occhieppo Superiore	2812	2893	2831	2627	2.88	-2.14	-7.21
Sandigliano	2662	2722	2730	2595	2.25	0.29	-4.95
Valdengo	2440	2526	2532	2396	3.52	0.24	-5.37
Trivero	7331	6907	2503	2385	-5.78	-63.76	-4.71
Tollegno	2928	2725	2655	2385	-6.93	-2.57	-10.17
Pralungo	2730	2758	2678	2301	1.03	-2.90	-14.08
Pollone	2135	2216	2185	2050	3.79	-1.40	-6.18
Quaregna	1296	1290	2034	2038	-0.46	57.67	0.20
Pray	2683	2460	2349	2037	-8.31	-4.51	-13.28
Brusnengo	2048	2114	2197	1958	3.22	3.93	-10.88
Masserano	2283	2264	2246	1932	-0.83	-0.80	-13.98
Salussola	2106	2062	2079	1871	-2.09	0.82	-10.00
Coggiola	2579	2385	2016	1673	-7.52	-15.47	-17.01

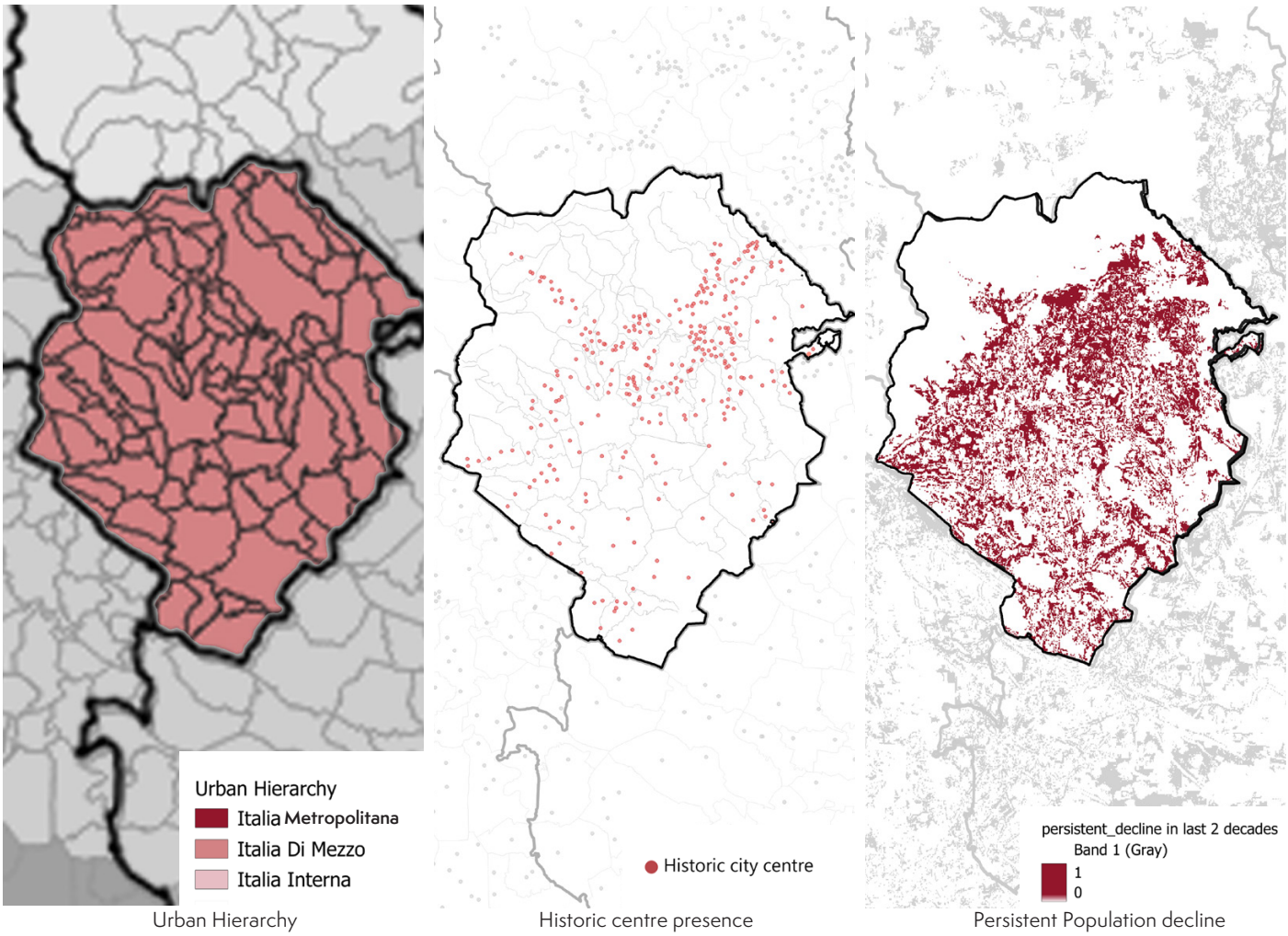
Table 4.3 Population Trend of Biella Source: ISTAT Database

Biella Demographic Trends from 1991-2021



Source: ISTAT Database

Fig 4.4 Shrinkage in Biella through years 1991-2021



Urban Hierarchy | Historic centre presence | Persistent Population decline

Fig 4.5 Indicators for Shrinkage in Biella

Source: ISTAT Database



Part A

Case Study - Enna

4.3 Enna as a Case of Advanced Shrinkage

The area selected is the **Free Municipal Consortium of Enna** (Libero Consorzio Comunale di Enna), a landlocked province in the heart of Sicily that has been experiencing intense outmigration and population decline across its territory for the past three decades.

The province was officially created in 1927 from portions of Caltanissetta and Catania. The capital was designated as Enna (then known as Castrogiovanni) rather than Piazza Armerina, largely due to the influence of the politician Napoleone Colajanni. With the suppression of the Sicilian provinces in 2015, it was reconstituted as the Free Municipal Consortium of Enna. Its capital, the city of Enna, sits on a mountain plateau and remains the highest provincial capital in Sicily. As the only landlocked province on the island, Enna extends over 2,574.70 square kilometres, with a population of 152,387 as of 2025.

Enna's central position has historically given it strategic importance, earning it the title of the "navel of Sicily." Its geography is shaped by rugged terrain, hilltop towns, and agricultural landscapes that have defined settlement patterns since antiquity. The city of Enna itself, perched at more than 900 metres above sea level, is a typical Sicilian hill side town, defensible in its topography and central in symbolic terms.

Over time, Enna has served as both a cultural and political hub, from its prominence in Greek and Roman antiquity to its consolidation under the Normans and later Spanish rule. The territory today still carries a rich mosaic of heritage assets, including castles, churches, archaeological sites, and agricultural traditions, which illustrate the historical layering so characteristic of Italy's inner areas. Yet, its limited connectivity with Sicily's coastal poles, coupled with deep socio-economic vulnerabilities, has gradually weakened its role. As a result, Enna now sits at the crossroads of heritage richness and structural fragility, firmly embedded in the narrative of shrinking and marginalised territories.

In recent decades, demographic contraction has become one of the defining characteristics of the province. Population decline has not occurred as a sudden rupture, but as a gradual and persistent process affecting both the capital and its surrounding municipalities. Youth outmigration toward coastal cities and northern regions has altered the demographic structure, increased the proportion of elderly residents and reduced the presence of economically active cohorts. Smaller municipalities within the consortium have been particularly affected, intensifying territorial imbalance and reinforcing patterns of internal marginality.

Economically, the province remains dependent on agriculture, public administration, and small-scale services, with limited diversification and weak integration into broader regional markets. While institutions such as Kore University introduce periods of vitality and mobility, these dynamics have not been sufficient to reverse long-term decline. Many students leave after completing their studies, contributing to a cycle in which educational presence does not translate into sustained demographic or economic consolidation.

Enna therefore represents a condition of advanced inland shrinkage in Southern Italy: territorially central within Sicily, yet functionally peripheral within contemporary economic and infrastructural networks.





Fig 4.6 Enna Historic Centre: Hilltop Urban Settlement

Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Enna, 2025.



Fig 4.7 Castello di Lombardia as a Territorial and Symbolic Landmark

Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Enna, 2025.

Geographic and Historical Context

The Free Municipal Consortium of Enna is situated in the very centre of Sicily, a position that historically gave it strategic importance and earned it the title of the "navel" of the island. The province is defined by rugged landscapes, scattered hilltop settlements, and long-standing agrarian traditions that have shaped its settlement patterns since antiquity. Its capital, the city of Enna, rises more than 900 meters above sea level and stands as one of the clearest examples of a Sicilian hillside town, at once defensible in its geography and central in its symbolic role.

Over the centuries, Enna has functioned as both a cultural and political reference point, first in its role during Greek and Roman times, and later through its consolidation under Norman and Spanish dominion. Today, the territory still presents a layered heritage fabric, with castles, churches, archaeological remains, and agricultural landscapes that speak to the depth of its historical significance. Yet, despite this richness, the province has become increasingly fragile. Its peripheral connections to Sicily's coastal poles, together with long-term socio-economic decline, have steadily eroded its centrality, positioning it within the wider narrative of shrinking and marginalised territories.

Spatial Dynamics and Socio-Economic Conditions

Spatially, the province is made up of a network of dispersed settlements, many of them concentrated in historic hilltop centres. Its limited infrastructural connections to major coastal cities such as Catania and Palermo reinforce a condition of relative isolation, which in turn has deepened both demographic and economic vulnerabilities. Over the past decades, Enna has seen a steady population decline, shaped by the combined effects of youth outmigration, falling birth rates, and an increasingly aging population.

On the economic side, the province has been weakened by the decline of traditional agricultural activities, the absence of strong industrial growth, and the limited expansion of the service sector. The presence of Kore University in Enna adds an

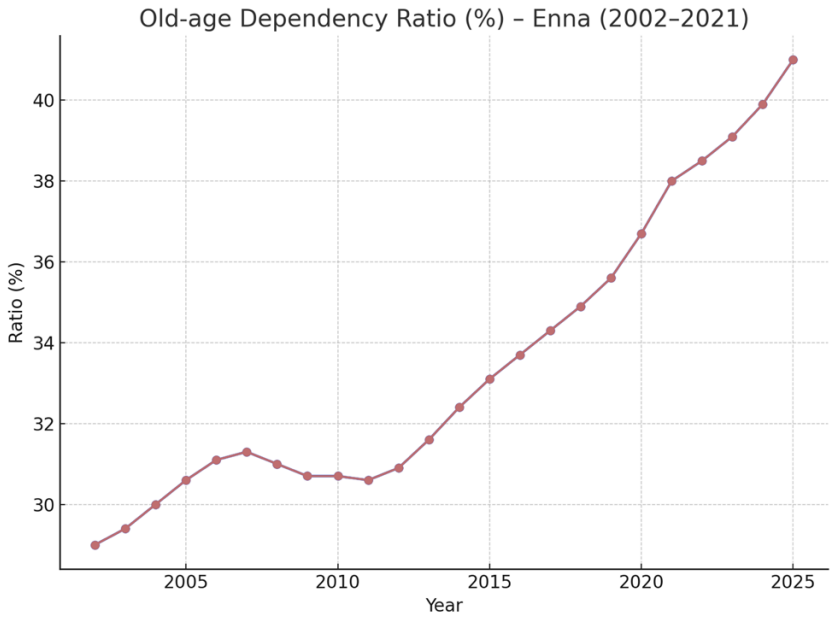
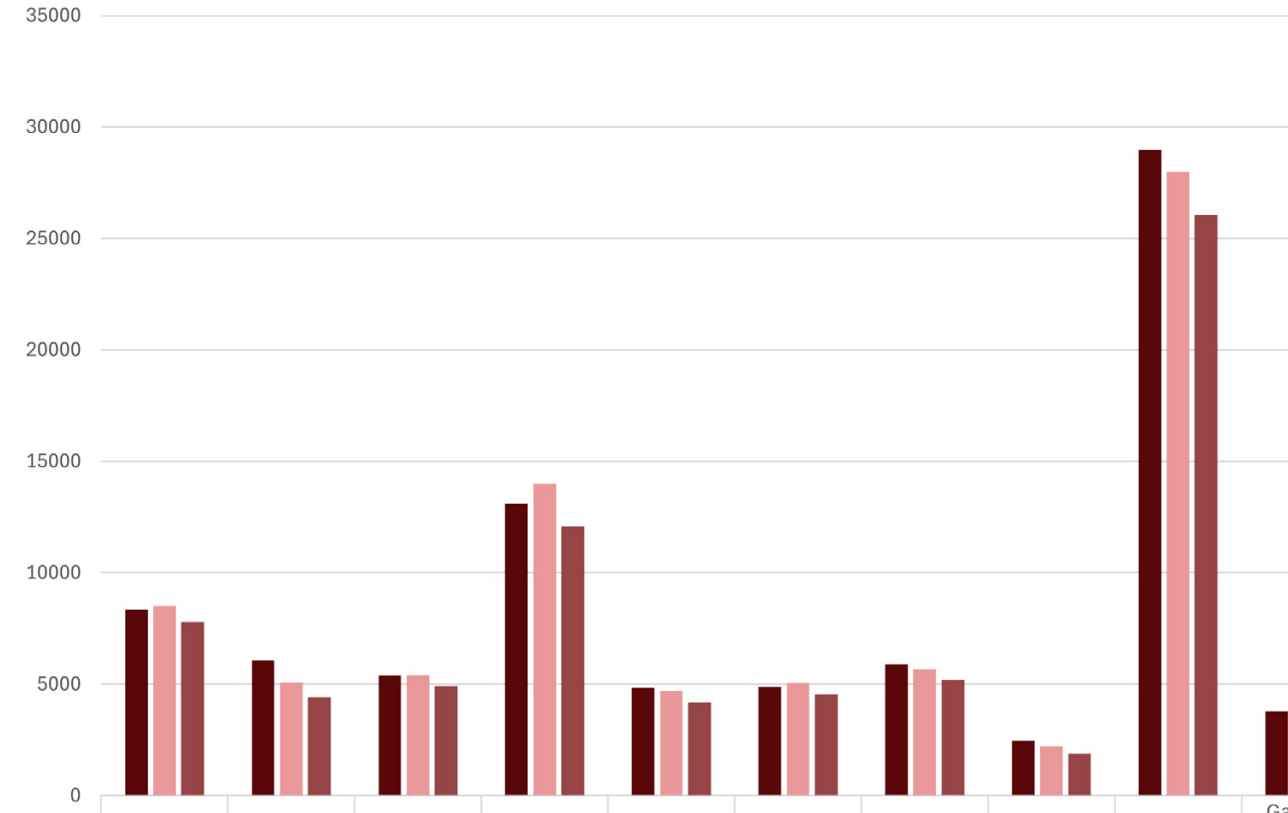


Fig 4.8 Old age dependency ratio 2002-2021

Source: ISTAT Database

important cultural and educational dimension, yet it has not been enough to counterbalance the structural fragilities of the local economy. Persistent unemployment, especially among the younger generation, continues to feed the cycle of outmigration. These dynamics directly affect the historic centres of the province, where vacancy, abandonment, and the underuse of heritage assets have become increasingly visible.

Spatially, Enna's settlements are dispersed, clustered on hilltops that historically provided defence but today represent accessibility challenges. The province has faced consistent demographic contraction across three decades: **-6.1% (1991-2001), -4.7% (2001-2011), and -4.4% (2011-2021).** The old-age dependency ratio increased from 27.9% in 2002 to 41.6% in 2021, illustrating how youth outmigration has hollowed the demographic pyramid. Economically, the province remains fragile, agriculture still accounts for around 13% of local employment, but without strong value-added networks, its productivity is stagnant. Industry is almost absent beyond small-scale manufacturing and construction, while services (58%) dominate but mostly in low-value forms. Even the cultural weight of Kore University, which positions Enna as a university city, has not reversed outmigration patterns, as students often leave after graduation. This creates a cycle of educational capital without local economic absorption, reinforcing structural decline.



	Agira	Aidone	Assoro	Barrafranca	Calascibetta	Catenanuova	Centuripe	Cerami	Enna	Ga Cast
2001	8348	6057	5393	13115	4829	4876	5903	2462	28983	
2011	8494	5074	5385	13983	4677	5029	5649	2186	27979	
2021	7756	4389	4892	12063	4169	4519	5172	1859	26037	

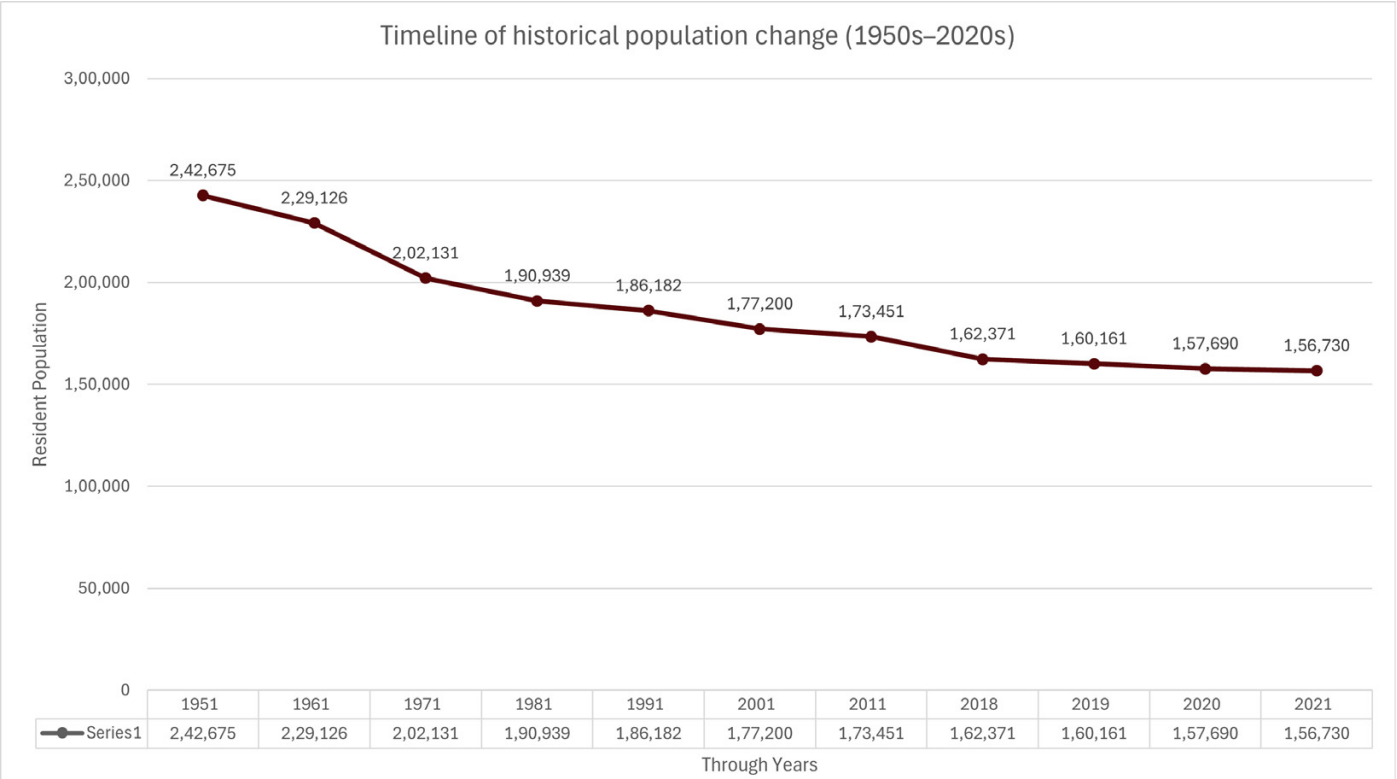
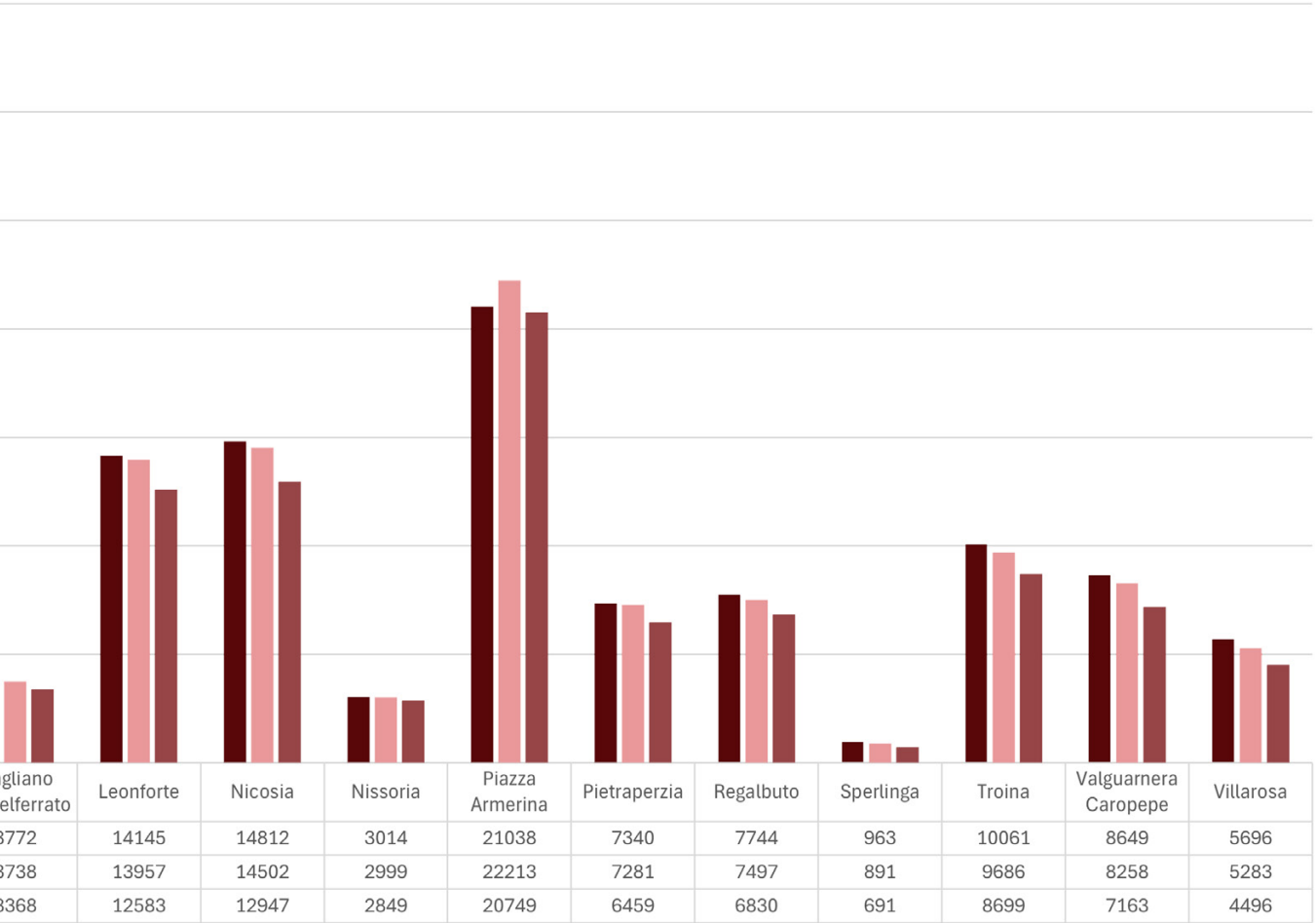


Fig 4.9 Demographic trend/ Historical Population Change 1950s-2020s

Source: ISTAT Database



gliano elferrato	Leonforte	Nicosia	Nissoria	Piazza Armerina	Pietraperzia	Regalbuto	Sperlinga	Troina	Valguarnera Caropepe	Villarosa
3772	14145	14812	3014	21038	7340	7744	963	10061	8649	5696
3738	13957	14502	2999	22213	7281	7497	891	9686	8258	5283
3368	12583	12947	2849	20749	6459	6830	691	8699	7163	4496

Source: ISTAT Database

Fig 4.10 Population Throughout last 3 decades in Enna

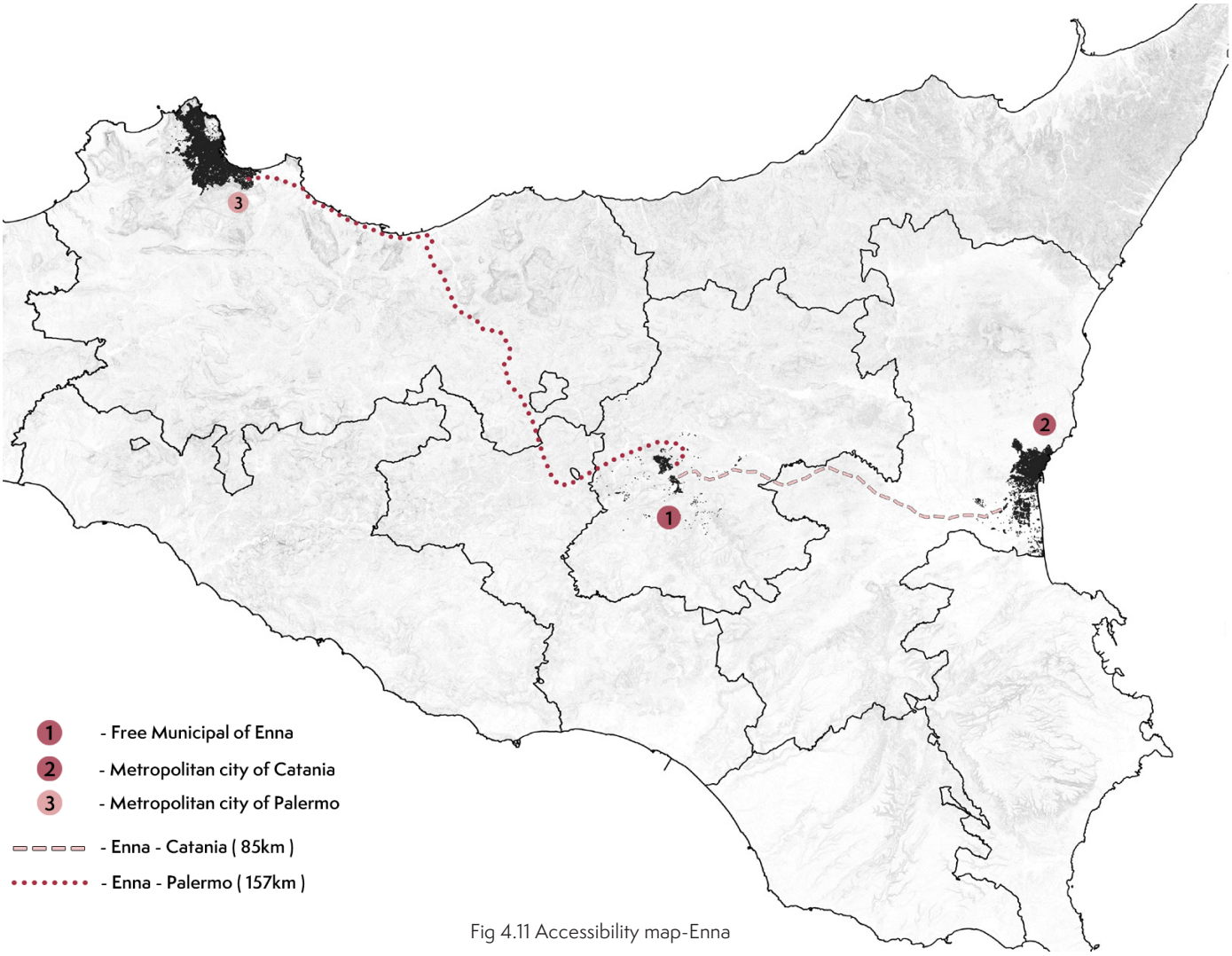


Fig 4.11 Accessibility map-Enna

The accessibility map shows how reaching Enna requires moving away from the main mobility corridors of Sicily. **The city is not directly connected to high-capacity transport networks, and access is mainly dependent on secondary roads** that wind through the inland territory. Travel times are long, connections are indirect, and mobility relies almost entirely on private vehicles. Public transport options are limited, both in frequency and coverage, making everyday movement to and from the city difficult, especially for those without a car.

Once inside the city, mobility remains constrained by topography. The historic centre is located at the highest point of the settlement, accessible through steep and narrow roads that were not designed for contemporary traffic volumes. This creates **a strong reliance on cars even for short distances**, resulting in congestion along access streets and the occupation of squares and public spaces as parking areas. Pedestrian movement is possible, but physically demanding, particularly for elderly residents, who make up a large share of the population.

These conditions shape daily life in the historic centre. Limited accessibility reduces the city's capacity to attract new residents, visitors, and economic activities, while internal mobility constraints discourage everyday use of public space. The map therefore does not simply represent physical access, but helps explain how geographic position and mobility limitations reinforce isolation and contribute to long-term shrinkage in Enna.

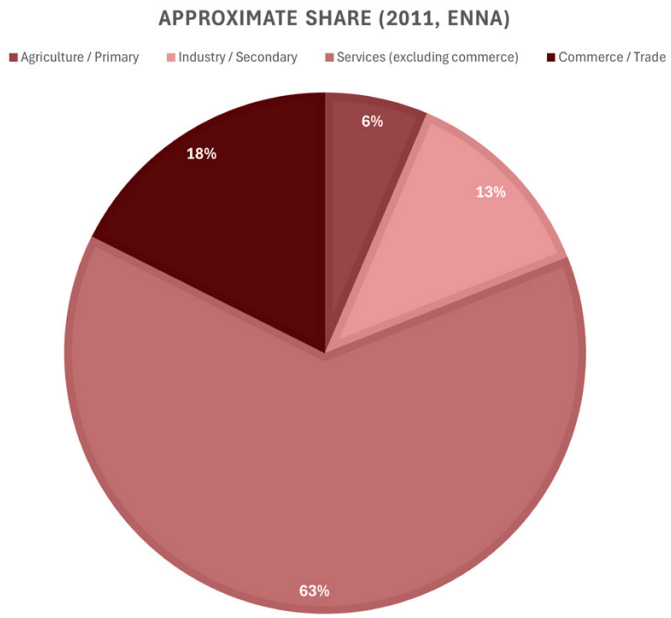


Fig 4.12 Employment by sector

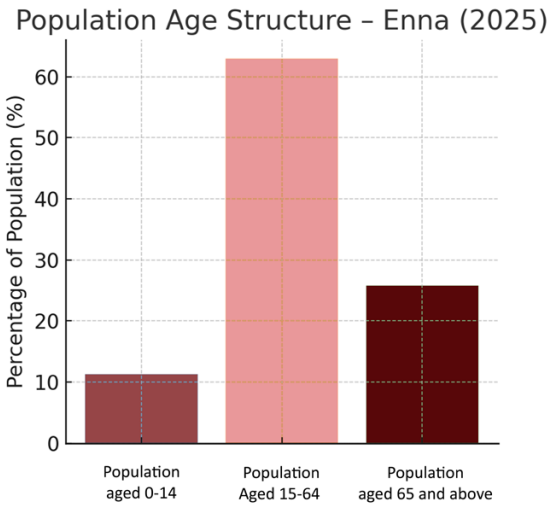


Fig 4.13 Age Structure graph

Source: ISTAT Database

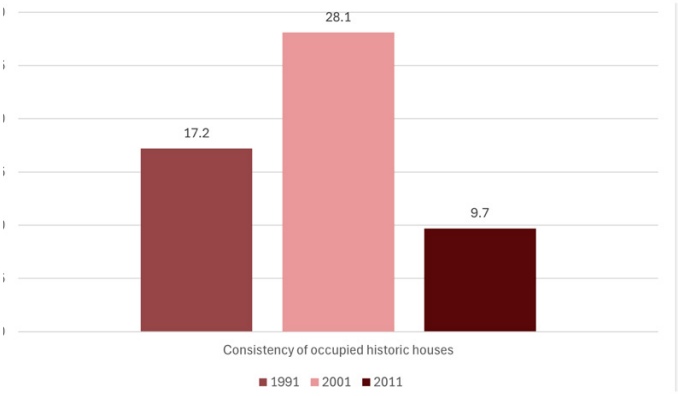


Fig 4.14 Occupancy of Historic Buildings

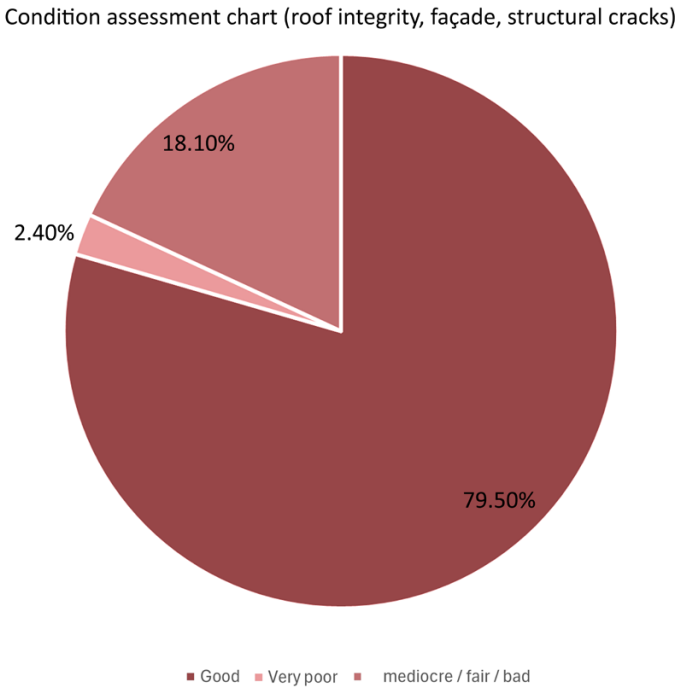
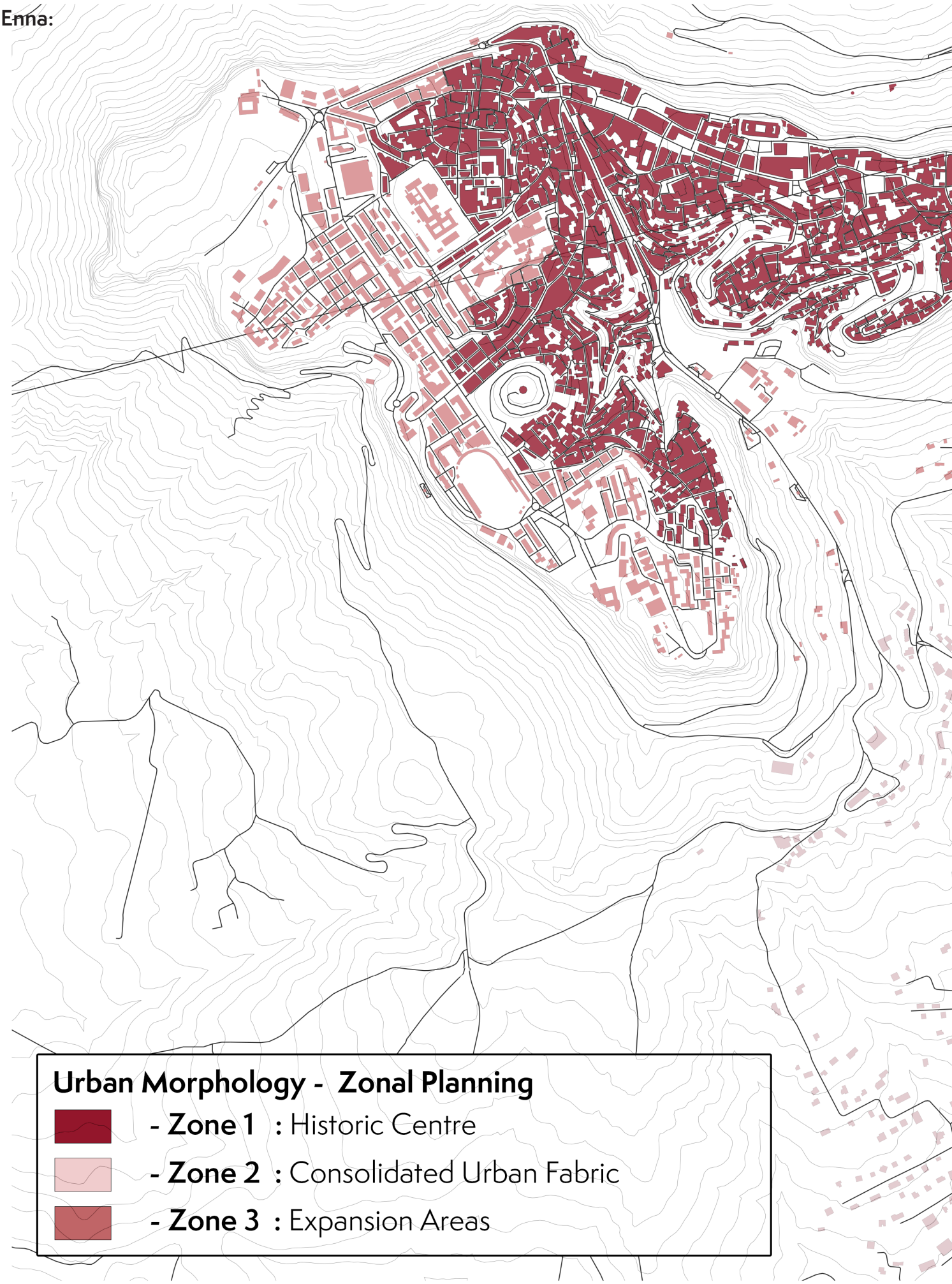


Fig 4.15 Condition assessment bar chart (roof integrity, facade, structural cracks).

Source: ottomilacensus.istat.it

Enna:


Urban Morphology - Zonal Planning
- Zone 1 : Historic Centre
- Zone 2 : Consolidated Urban Fabric
- Zone 3 : Expansion Areas

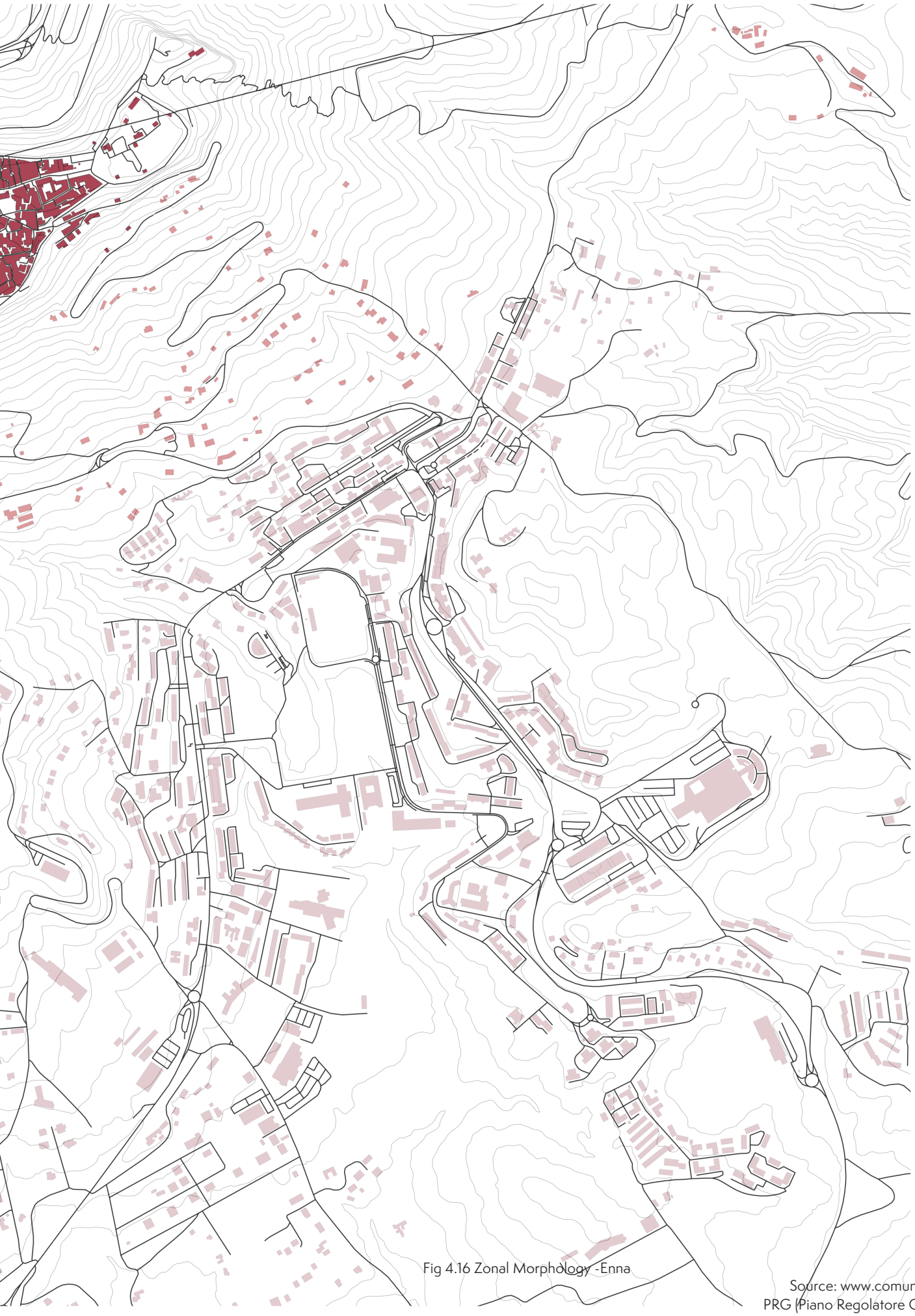


Fig 4.16 Zonal Morphology -Enna

Source: www.comune.enna.it
PRG (Piano Regolatore Generale)





Fig 4.17 High-Density Fabric within a Constrained Terrain

Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Enna, 2025.

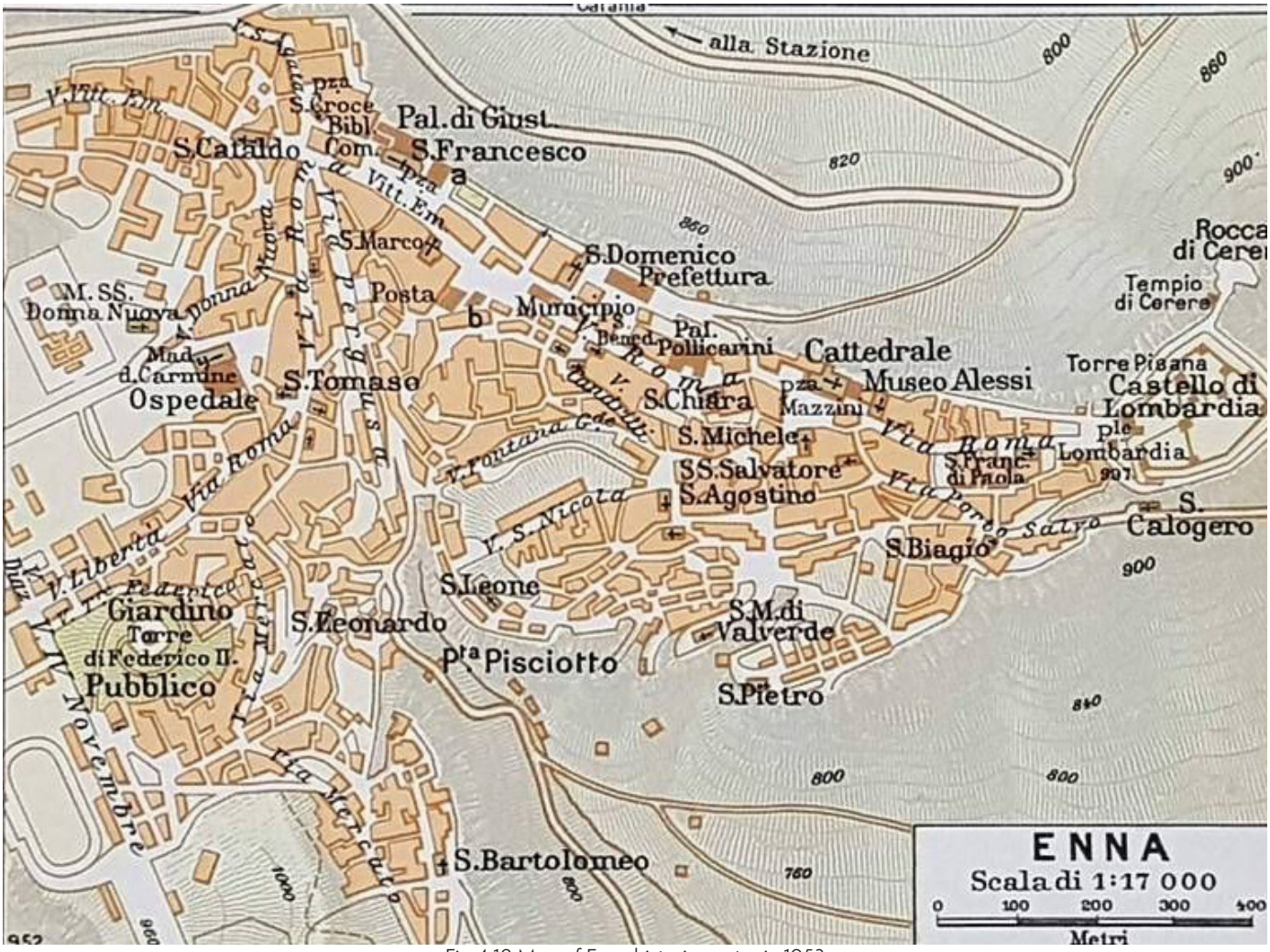


Fig 4.18 Map of Enna historic center in 1953

Source: Carta geografica antica CASTROGIOVANNI ENNA Sicilia

4.4 Heritage Under Conditions of Demographic Decline

The historic centre of Enna contains a rich and layered set of heritage assets, including medieval fortifications, religious buildings, civic structures, and a compact residential fabric shaped by its position on the mountain. Together, these elements give the historic centre a strong architectural coherence and a clear symbolic identity, made even more evident by its visibility within the surrounding landscape. From a morphological point of view, the historic fabric appears largely intact and continuous.

Yet behind this apparent continuity, the historic centre is increasingly marked by selective abandonment and uneven reuse. Many residential buildings within the core are only partially occupied, while others remain completely vacant, especially on upper floors and along secondary streets. In several cases, long term residents have moved out, leaving buildings closed for long periods of time. This contributes to a slow loss of everyday life, a process that is not always immediately visible, as decay often unfolds quietly behind preserved facades.

At the same time, a limited number of buildings, particularly those in more central or visible locations, have been converted into touristic accommodations, short-term rentals, or Airbnb units. While these uses bring temporary activity and a certain economic visibility, they do not address the wider demographic decline affecting the city. Instead, they tend to replace permanent inhabitation with seasonal or intermittent presence. As a result, some parts of the historic centre appear active at specific times, while remaining largely empty for most of the year.

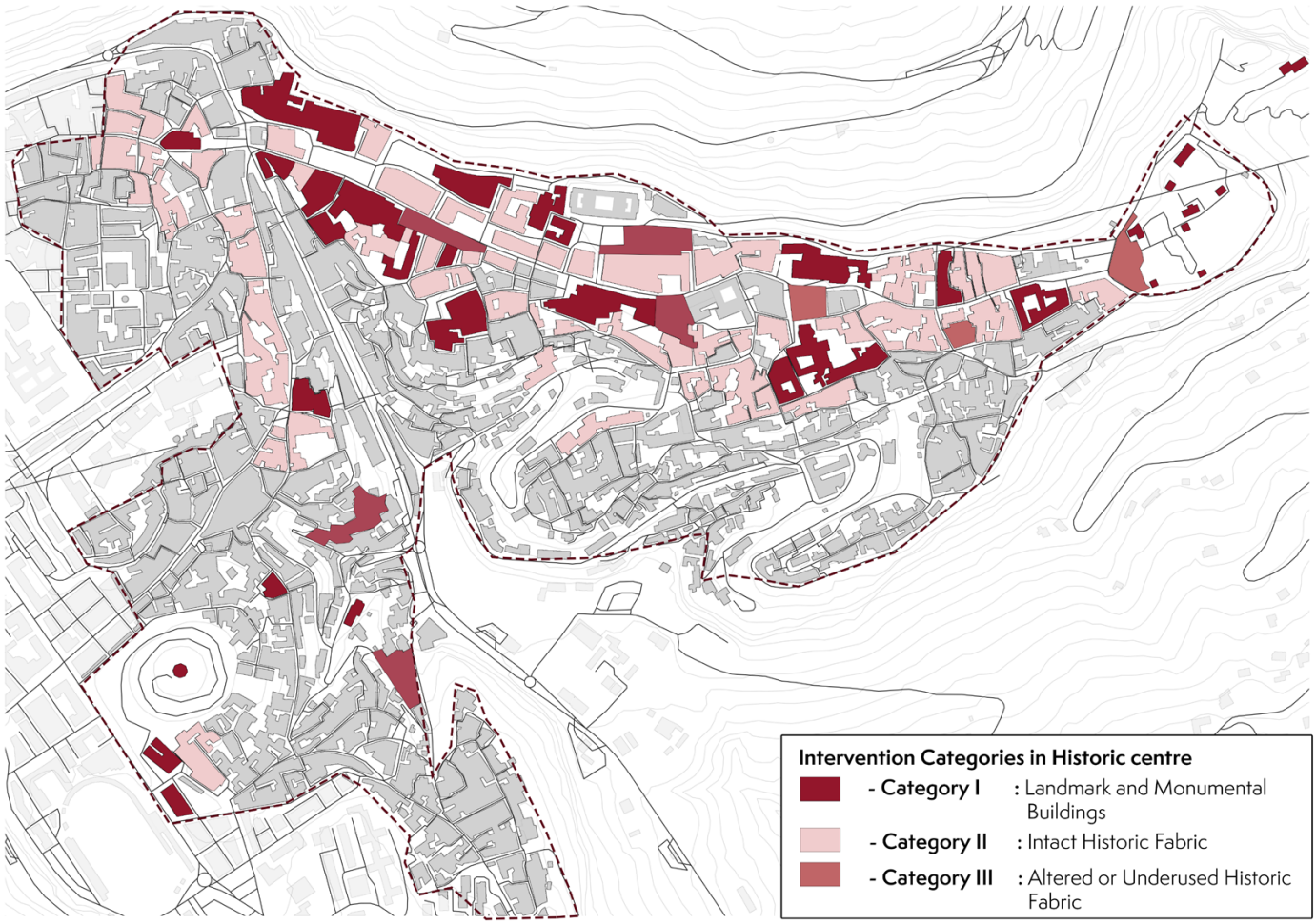


Fig 4.19 Intervention categories in Historic centre

Source: www.comune.enna.it
PRG (Piano Regolatore Generale)

This kind of selective touristic reuse produces a fragmented urban condition. Certain streets and landmark areas are maintained and visually curated, while nearby residential fabric continues to deteriorate due to the lack of stable use and investment. What emerges is a historic centre where heritage is increasingly treated as an image to be preserved, while everyday urban functions become weaker and more fragile. In this context, tourism does not operate as a regenerative force, but rather as a partial layer that coexists with ongoing processes of shrinkage.

The vulnerability of Enna's heritage therefore lies less in the absence of protection and more in the lack of stable social and residential life. Conservation-oriented planning tools are effective in controlling physical transformation, but they offer limited responses to vacancy, demographic loss, and the growing conversion of housing into non-residential uses. Without permanent residents, heritage buildings risk becoming isolated objectsmaintained, yet detached from daily urban life.

At the same time, this fragile condition also contains potential opportunities. The compact urban form, architectural quality, and strong identity of Enna's historic centre provide a basis for small-scale and incremental forms of adaptive reuse, particularly those oriented toward long-term habitation rather than short-term tourism. Strategies that support residential reoccupation, mixed-use activities, and gradual transformation could help stabilise the historic centre, even under conditions of reduced population.





Fig 4.20, 4.21 Decay and Vacancy in the Historic Centre Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Enna, 2025.



Fig 4.22 Decay and Vacancy in the Historic Centre Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Enna, 2025.

Urban decay :

Urban decay in Enna's historic centre is not expressed through sudden collapse, but through gradual abandonment. The built fabric remains largely intact, yet many buildings are only partially used or completely vacant. Upper floors stay closed for years, ground floors remain shuttered, and certain secondary streets experience long periods without everyday activity. What appears preserved from the outside often conceals prolonged underuse within.

This condition is closely tied to demographic shrinkage. As residents relocate and younger generations leave, the demand for housing and local services weakens. Maintenance becomes irregular, private investment slows, and everyday life thins out. The result is not visible ruin, but a quiet hollowing of the historic core.

In this sense, abandonment in Enna is less about physical destruction and more about functional retreat. The photographs illustrate spaces that are structurally present but socially absent. Heritage remains materially protected, yet increasingly detached from stable residential life. Urban decay here unfolds slowly, reinforcing the fragile balance between persistence and decline.





Fig 4.23, 4.24 Car-Dominated Public Space within the Historic Centre

Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Enna, 2025.





Fig 4.25,4.26 Public Space without Social Use

Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Enna, 2025.

4.5 Everyday Life and Local Perceptions

"When I was young, Sundays meant something," one resident recalled. "People dressed up, the square was full, music played. Now it's empty… and nobody even noticed when it stopped."

The interviews in Enna unfold through memories like this. Small moments that show how decline is lived not as a sudden collapse, but as a slow fading of everyday life. Most people spoken to are lifelong residents, those who never left or who came back after years away. They don't talk about crisis, but about subtraction: fewer people, fewer places to meet, fewer sounds in the streets. "It's still slow," another interviewee said. "It always was. But now it feels like the city is breathing less." Slowness, once part of Enna's identity, has turned into stagnation. Cinemas and theatres disappeared, and with them, shared moments. The university brought some movement, but not everyday life. **"The students keep the city alive,"** one shop owner said, **"but when they leave, Enna feels empty again."**

The absence of young people is everywhere, yet rarely spoken about. "I never really noticed," someone admitted. "But yes… they're gone." Migration feels normal now, part of family stories. "My children left years ago," another said. "Maybe that's why I stopped seeing it."

People leave not because they want to, but because they have to. Jobs are few, transport is weak, and coming back after studies feels impossible. "You can't build a life here," one person said, "unless you inherit one." Schools empty, evenings in the historic centre pass in silence.

Work still exists, but it no longer creates stability. Older residents remember factories and agriculture. **"We had industries," one said. "Now just empty buildings."** Today, Enna survives on services, public jobs, and small tourism. "It's not that we don't work," someone explained. "Our work just doesn't build anything lasting."

Tourism is often mentioned as a solution, but it feels fragile. "We have everything," one entrepreneur said, "but no one knows how to use it." The city is hard to reach and poorly connected.

As the population ages, daily life slows even more. Shops open late and close early. Events disappear. **"In winter, the streets are silent,"** one person said. "Only the wind." Younger people look elsewhere. "We celebrate in other towns," someone added. "Here, there's no movida anymore."

Services make this worse. Healthcare is weak, transport unreliable, schools fragile. **"For real care, we go to Catania." "Buses come late." "Trains barely move."**

"The centre died first," one resident said. "Then we all started living around its shadow.**"As activities moved outward, the historic centre lost its daily life. Houses emptied, shops closed, streets became places of memory.** "Every empty house feels like a ghost," someone said. "A story left unfinished."

Still, heritage holds the city together. People speak with affection about the castle, the cathedral, the squares. "The castle still watches us," one smiled, "even if we forget to look up." These places keep a sense of belonging alive.

When asked what could change Enna's future, answers were simple: better transport, real jobs, working infrastructure. But underneath, something deeper came out. **"We got used to decline," one person said. "That's the saddest part."**

And yet, hope stays. Quiet, stubborn. "Some young people are coming back." "Some of us never left." Regeneration, they believe, won't come from symbolic projects, but from those who still care enough to stay.

- **Everyday Decline and the Loss of Collective Life** Interviewees describe decline not as a crisis but as a gradual thinning of everyday social practices, empty squares, lost rituals, and disappearing cultural venues.
- **Demographic Imbalance and Silent Outmigration** The absence of young people and families is widely acknowledged, though often normalized, revealing how long-term migration has become an unquestioned condition of life.
- **Economic Fragility and Precarious Livelihoods** The transition from agriculture and industry to services and micro-tourism has produced unstable employment that fails to anchor long-term settlement.
- **Aging, Services, and Spatial Marginalization** An aging population, weak transport, and declining access to healthcare and education reinforce both social isolation and the hollowing out of the historic centre.
- **Heritage, Memory, and Latent Potential** Despite decline, residents express strong emotional attachment to heritage sites, public spaces, and abandoned buildings, seen simultaneously as symbols of loss and opportunity.

How Residents Understand the Problem

Across the interviews, Enna's decline is understood less as an internal failure and more as the outcome of long-term structural neglect. Residents do not describe the problem in technical planning terms, but through a sense of distance, from opportunities, decision-making, and wider regional and national networks. Decline has become normalized: outmigration, aging, and the reduction of services are accepted as everyday conditions, even as they generate frustration and quiet grief. The lack of mobility, employment, and institutional presence makes it difficult for residents to imagine a future rooted in the historic centre.

Importantly, interviewees do not reject change. Instead, they express skepticism toward superficial or externally driven regeneration that overlooks daily realities. Without addressing infrastructure, accessibility, and long-term economic stability, symbolic interventions remain ineffective. At the same time, strong attachment to heritage and collective memory persists. Identity is not perceived as lost, but as increasingly difficult to sustain.

Overall, the interviews portray Enna as a city suspended between persistence and abandonment. Shrinkage is experienced not only as population loss, but as a lived condition shaped by waiting and adaptation. Residents remain not because of opportunity, but because of belonging. Resilience here is not expressed through optimism, but through endurance—the quiet choice to stay, to care, and to keep the city alive.

4.6 Constraints and Latent Opportunities in Enna's Historic Centre

The province of Enna today embodies a complex equilibrium between decline and resilience. Its challenges are structural, demographic contraction, an ageing population, limited infrastructure, and fragmented governance, yet its latent strengths remain visible across both urban and rural scales. Between 1991 and 2021, Enna's population decreased by over 15%, and in some municipalities the loss exceeds 25%. Youth outmigration has hollowed out the workforce, and in many hill towns the median age now surpasses fifty. Service reduction follows this demographic rhythm: fewer schools, reduced public transport, and diminishing health facilities reinforce the cycle of isolation.

And yet, beneath this surface of retreat, there exists a quiet vitality. Latencies lie in the abundance of unused buildings, the resilience of agricultural terraces still cultivated by older generations, and the endurance of intangible traditions, processions, feasts, and craft rituals that continue to hold social meaning. These layers represent not nostalgia but potential, a cultural infrastructure capable of being reactivated.

Enna's challenge lies in connecting these small experiments into a coherent strategy. Improved accessibility remains essential: more reliable bus and rail connections to Catania and Palermo could reduce spatial isolation, while digital connectivity could attract remote workers and creative professionals. Incentives for return migration, when coupled with affordable housing in historic centres, could reintroduce life where it has been absent.

The province thus stands at a delicate but promising threshold. Its decline may be structural, but its assets, material, cultural, and human, are still tangible and adaptable. Enna's future resilience depends on recognising that its shrinking condition is not an end-state but a new phase of transformation. If guided by coherent policy and civic engagement, the province could redefine what "development" means in the Italian interior: not growth in numbers, but growth in meaning, identity, and collective care.

STRENGTHS

- Strong continuity of historic fabric like Norman, medieval, and Baroque layers remain intact.
- Deep cultural memory in festivals, crafts, and religious rituals still alive among residents.
- Scenic hilltop settings and panoramic landscapes offering strong identity value.
- Presence of major heritage anchors like Castello di Lombardia and Duomo Maria Santissima della Visitazione
- Growing civic pride and small local initiatives for restoration and reuse.

WEAKNESS

- Severe depopulation and ageing population across towns (-15% to –30%).
- High vacancy rate and structural decay in historic cores (roof collapse, façade erosion).
- Limited infrastructure and poor accessibility to major cities.
- Fragmented governance and lack of coordination between municipalities.
- Shift of services to the periphery, leaving historic centers inactive.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Adaptive reuse of abandoned houses for small hospitality, co-living, and cultural residencies.
- Development of eco-cultural and religious tourism circuits.
- Potential to integrate projects under SNAI and PNRR programmes.
- Heritage-based economy through crafts revival and slow mobility networks.
- Re-attraction of return migrants and remote workers through digitalisation and affordable housing.

THREATS

- Continuous outmigration may exceed restoration efforts.
- Climate and seismic risks accelerating deterioration of built heritage.
- Dependence on short-term funding cycles.
- Risk of superficial tourism or cosmetic regeneration not rooted in community.
- Political instability and weak long-term management capacity.

SWOT



Part B

Case Study - Biella

4.7 Biella Between Industrial Legacy and Shrinkage

The province of Biella, located in the north-eastern sector of Piedmont at the transition between the Po Valley and the Alpine foothills, represent *the northern counterpart of the Italian geography of decline. Once highly productive and well connected,* this province illustrate how shrinkage can also appear in places that were never peripheral in the classic sense but have become so through economic transition and structural change.

Historically, Biella grew as one of Europe's most important textile capitals. From the nineteenth century onwards, it developed a dense landscape of mills, workshops, and workers' neighbourhoods that merged industrial activity with social identity. The Cervo River was both its energy source and symbolic spine, weaving through valleys where every town had its own spinning mill

Yet behind this proud identities lies a steady transformation. Between 1991 and 2021, Biella lost about 10.6 % of its inhabitants. The closure of factories, automation of agriculture, and the migration of younger generations toward Turin, Milan, and abroad have left behind an aging and scattered population. In many towns, schools have merged or closed, shops operate seasonally, and industrial zones lie partially empty. These territories now stand at a crossroads, no longer central enough to benefit from metropolitan growth, but not remote enough to attract targeted policies. Their story reflects the condition of Middle Italy's northern edge, where economic modernity and social fragility coexist within landscapes of extraordinary beauty and memory. The consequences of this transformation are visible across the territory. Many municipalities now face an ageing population, with a reduced presence of economically active cohorts. Schools have merged or closed due to declining enrolment, local commerce operates intermittently, and portions of former industrial areas remain underused. While the built environment remains largely intact, its functional intensity has diminished. Industrial complexes, once central to economic and social life, now stand as fragments within the landscape, preserved materially but detached from their original purpose.

Biella therefore occupies a complex position within the national geography of shrinkage. It is neither an isolated inner area nor a fully integrated metropolitan fringe. Instead, it represents an intermediate territory that has experienced loss not through physical marginality, but through economic restructuring and the gradual centralisation of opportunity elsewhere. These territories now stand at a crossroads: no longer central enough to benefit from metropolitan growth dynamics, yet not remote enough to receive dedicated inland policies.

Their condition reflects the broader situation of Middle Italy's northern edge, where industrial modernity and social fragility coexist within landscapes of exceptional environmental and cultural value. Shrinkage here does not manifest as dramatic abandonment, but as incremental thinning of demographic and economic vitality. Understanding this subtle but persistent transition is essential for framing planning responses that recognise both the weight of industrial heritage and the necessity of adaptation to reduced demand.





Fig 4.27 Biella Historic Centre: Compact Historic Urban Fabric

Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Biella, 2026.



Fig 4.28 Biella - Hilltop Mid size city in the Valley

Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Biella, 2026.

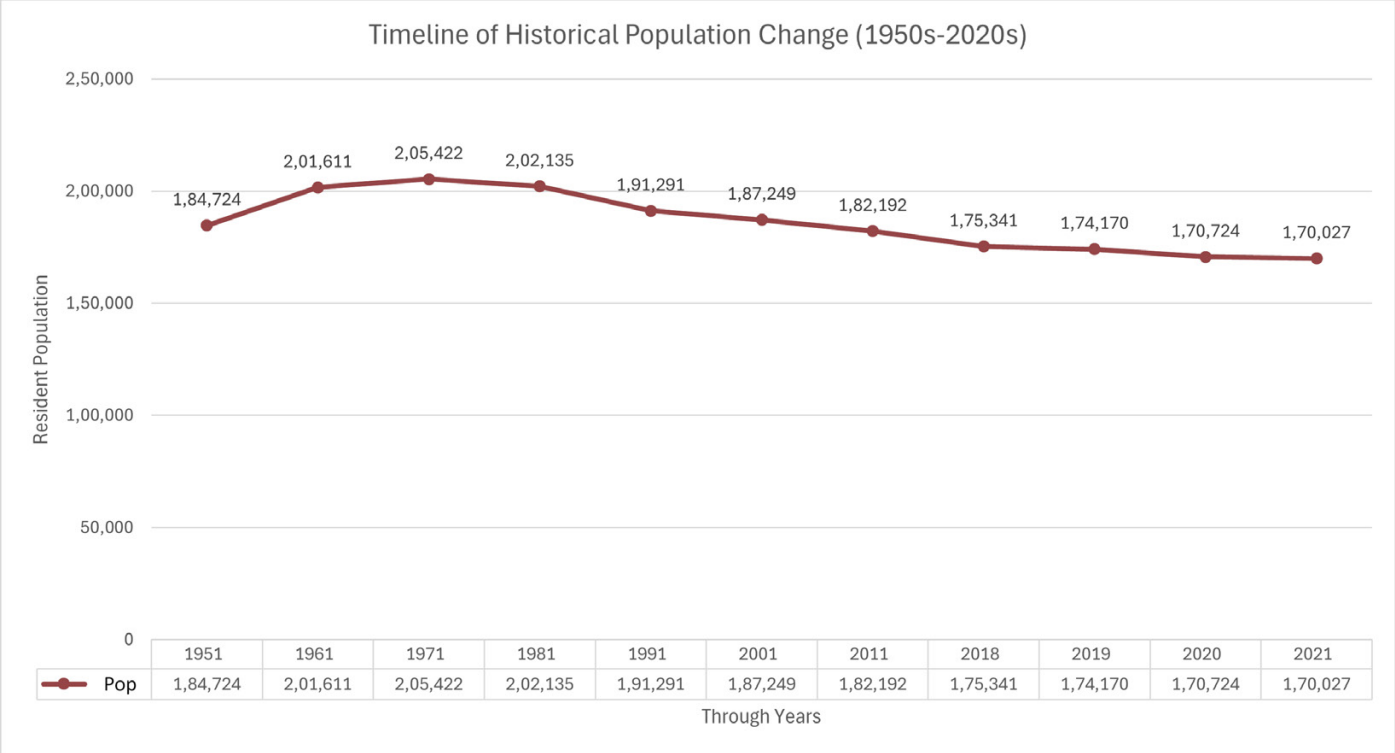
Spatial Dynamics and Socio-Economic Conditions

Biella has experienced a gradual demographic decline over the past decades, accompanied by population ageing and selective outmigration. Shrinkage in Biella does not manifest uniformly across the urban territory. Instead, it appears as a spatially uneven process, where certain neighbourhoods maintain activity while others, particularly within the historic centre, progressively lose functions and residents.

Within the historic centre, this process is visible through declining residential density, vacant or underused housing, and the closure of traditional commercial activities. Ground-floor spaces that once hosted everyday services increasingly remain empty or are occupied intermittently. Public spaces continue to exist, but their intensity of use has diminished, especially outside specific events or peak hours.

Socio-economically, Biella retains some resilience due to its location within a broader regional network. Commuting patterns, cultural initiatives, and small-scale economic activities still connect the city to external systems. However, these dynamics have not translated into a sustained revitalisation of the historic centre. New investments and populations tend to locate in more accessible or peripheral areas, reinforcing a gradual shift away from the historic core.

This produces a paradoxical condition: Biella functions as a city, but its historic centre no longer functions as the heart of everyday urban life. Shrinkage here is not expressed through dramatic abandonment, but through loss of intensity, reduced diversity of uses, and a weakening of social interaction. These spatial and socio-economic dynamics form the background against which planning and regeneration strategies must be evaluated.



Source: ISTAT Database

Fig 4.29 Demographic trend/ Historical Population Change 1950s-2020s

The demographic trajectories of Biella reveal a similar rhythm of decline across three decades. Biella fell by **-3.9% (1991-2001), -3.4% (2001-2011), and -3.3% (2011-2021)**, **The old-age dependency ratio reached 43.2% in Biella**, showing an increasingly fragile age structure. Economically, Biella's post-industrial economy left behind abandoned mills and shrinking industrial employment, with services now accounting for 62% of jobs.

The textile sector historically employing over 40% of the working-age population has contracted by 25% since 2001 through offshoring, automation, and global competition, directly eroding the municipal tax base and triggering sustained outmigration that reduced provincial population by 10.7% between 1991 and 2021.

While services have expanded modestly (retail +12%, tourism +8%), these gains fail to compensate for manufacturing losses, leaving an aging index of 220 elders per 100 youth and vacancy rates exceeding 18% in the historic core and deconsecrated mills.

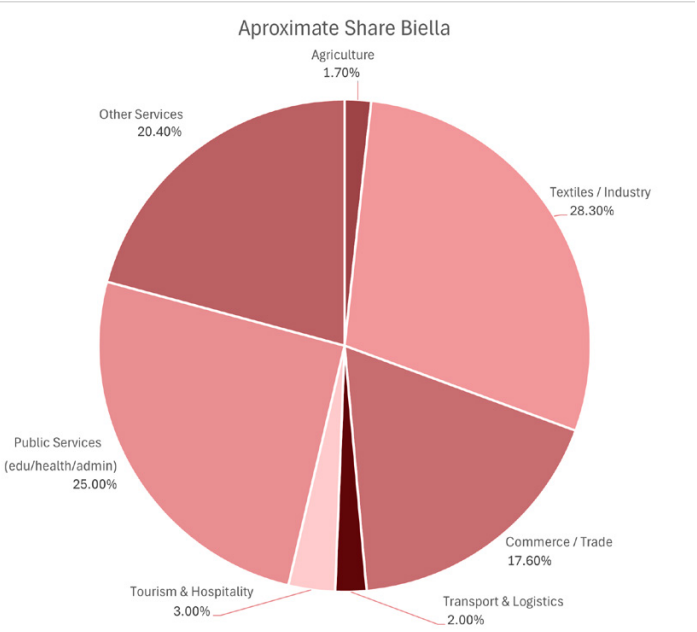
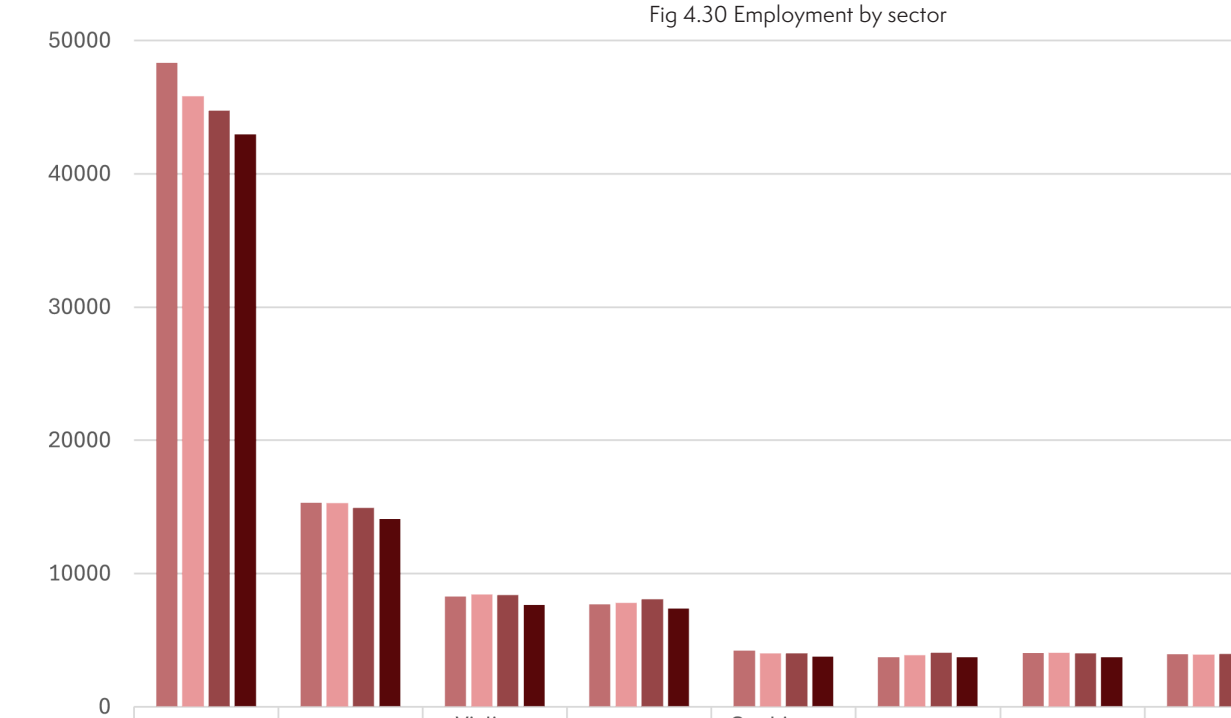


Fig 4.30 Employment by sector



	Biella	Cossato	Vigliano Biellese	Candelo	Occhieppo Inferiore	Ponderano	Mongrando	Gaglia
Pop 1991	48324	15321	8286	7697	4194	3696	4020	393
Pop 2001	45815	15250	8421	7764	3980	3848	4036	387
Pop 2011	44726	14881	8354	8026	4002	4006	3981	391
Pop 2021	42943	14070	7618	7356	3777	3733	3715	371

Pop 1991 Pop

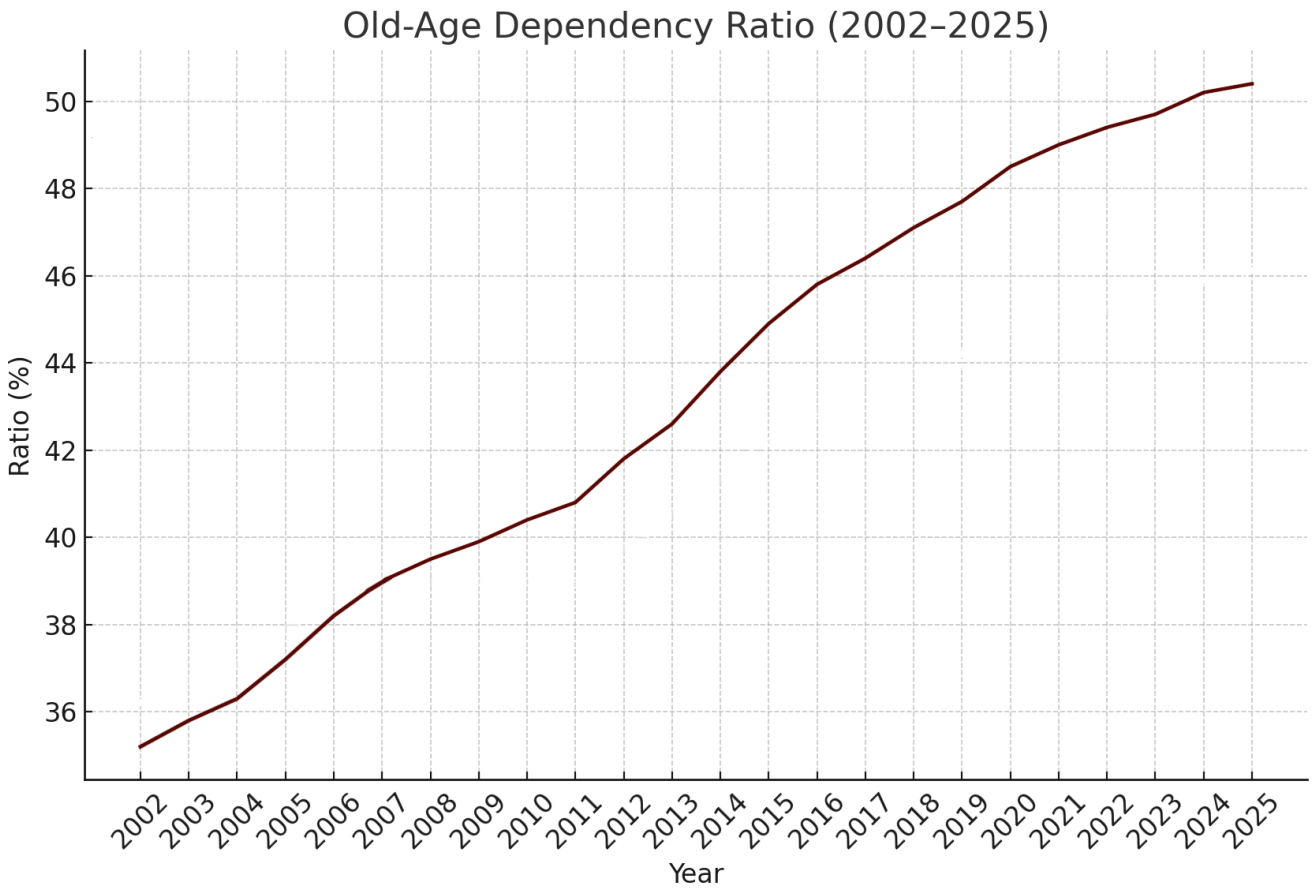


Fig 4.31 Old age dependency ratio 2002-2021

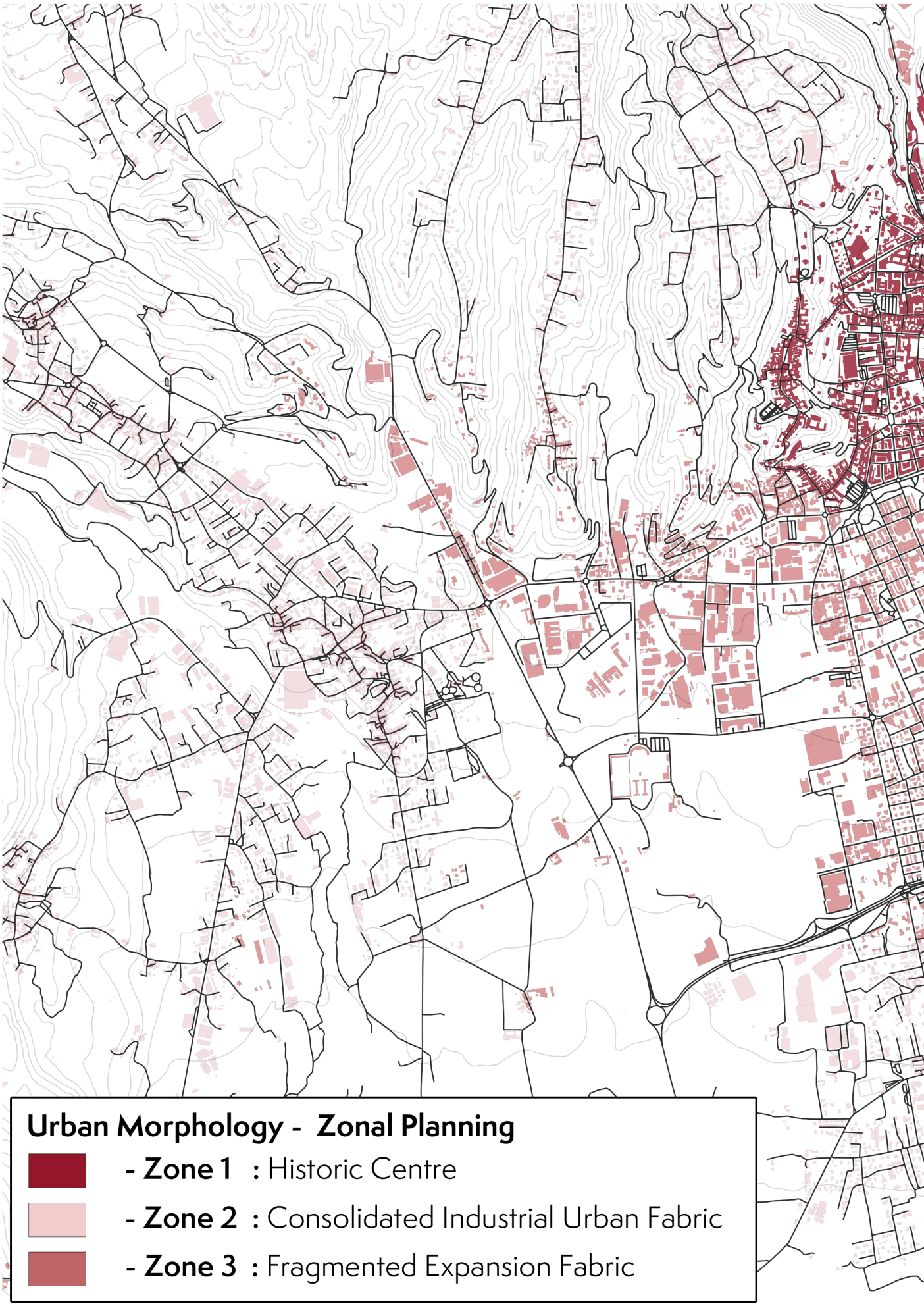
Source: ISTAT Database

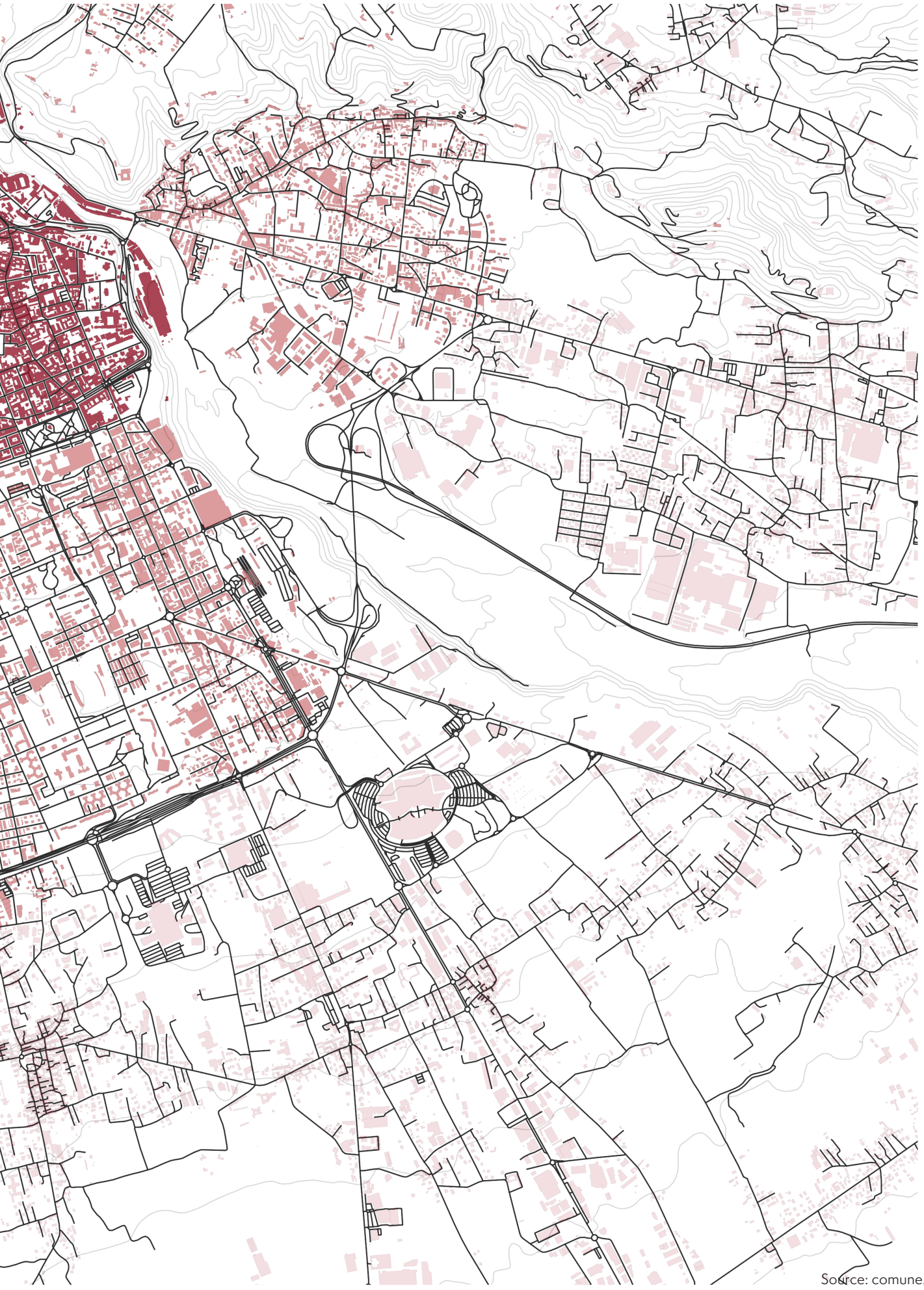
nico	Cavaglià	Andorno Micca	Cerrione	Lessona	Occhieppo Superiore	Sandigliano	Valdengo	Trivero	Tollegno
4	3612	3681	2628	2301	2812	2662	2440	7331	2928
2	3703	3569	2773	2437	2893	2722	2526	6907	2725
9	3616	3466	2929	2852	2831	2730	2532	2503	2655
0	3537	3027	2802	2642	2627	2595	2396	2385	2385

2001 Pop 2011 Pop 2021

Fig 4.32 Population Throughout last 3 decades Biella

Source: ISTAT Database


Urban Morphology - Zonal Planning
- Zone 1 : Historic Centre
- Zone 2 : Consolidated Industrial Urban Fabric
- Zone 3 : Fragmented Expansion Fabric



Source: comune.biella.it
PRG (Piano Regolatore Generale)

Fig 4.33 Zonal Morphology -Biella

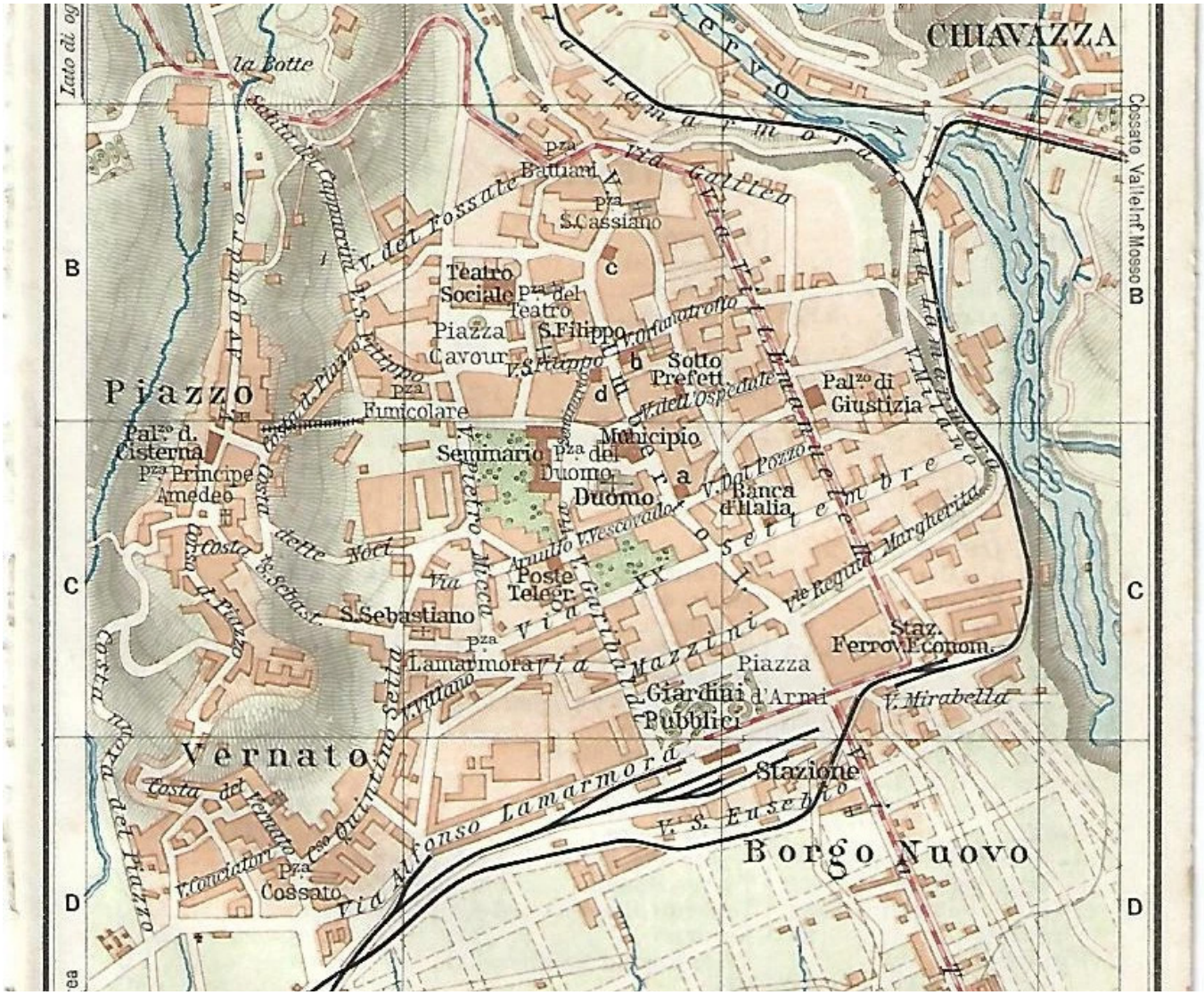


Fig 4.34 Historical Map of Biella Source: comune.biella.it

4.8 Industrial and Historic Heritage at Risk

The historic centre of Biella contains a rich and diverse set of heritage assets, including medieval buildings, religious institutions, historic palazzi, and elements of industrial heritage connected to textile production. Together, these elements form a strong urban identity that continues to shape local perceptions of the city.

Despite their physical integrity, many of these heritage assets face vulnerabilities linked not to decay, but to underuse and functional mismatch. Buildings designed for past social and economic conditions struggle to accommodate contemporary needs, particularly in a context of reduced population and limited demand. Preservation frameworks often prioritize material conservation, offering few incentives or tools for adaptive reuse.

Fragmented ownership, high maintenance costs, and regulatory rigidity further complicate reuse processes. As a result, heritage buildings risk becoming static objects, preserved but detached from everyday life. This condition threatens the long-term sustainability of the historic centre, as heritage without use becomes increasingly fragile.

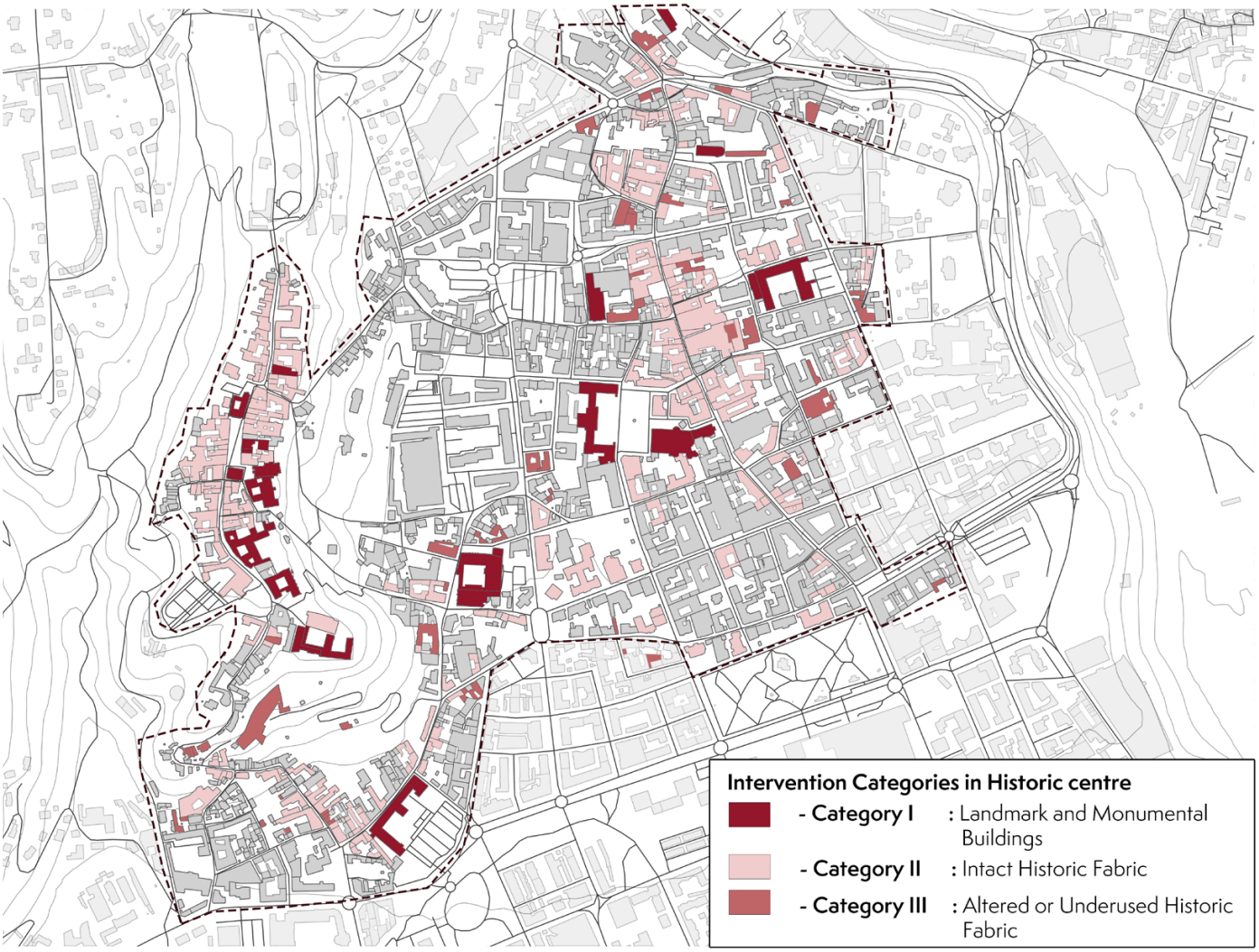


Fig 4.35 Intervention categories in Historic centre

Source: comune.biella.it
PRG (Piano Regolatore Generale)

At the same time, Biella's heritage assets offer opportunities for rethinking regeneration under shrinkage. Industrial heritage, cultural institutions, and existing civic spaces could support new forms of use aligned with demographic realities. Rather than pursuing growth-oriented revitalisation, the challenge lies in developing strategies that accept reduced demand while sustaining identity, livability, and social presence within the historic centre.





Fig 4.36 Legacy Industrial Fabric under Conditions of Contraction

Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Biella, 2026.





Fig 4.37, 4.38 Decay and
Vacancy in the Historic Centre

Source: Author's photograph, site visit,
Biella, 2026.





Fig 4.39, 4.40 Decay and
Vacancy in the Historic Centre

Source: Author's photograph, site visit,
Biella, 2026.





Fig 4.41, 4.42 Commercial Vacancy and
Signs of Urban Retraction



Fig 4.43 Commercial Vacancy and Signs of Urban Retraction

Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Biella, 2026.

Commercial Vacancy and Urban Retraction :

In Biella's historic centre, urban decay becomes visible primarily through commercial vacancy. Unlike dramatic abandonment, the process unfolds as a gradual withdrawal of everyday economic activity. Ground-floor shops remain closed, display windows are covered, and entire stretches of commercial streets operate below their former intensity. The built fabric remains physically stable, yet its economic function has progressively weakened.

This condition reflects broader structural shifts. The decline of the textile industry, combined with the relocation of retail toward peripheral commercial areas, has reduced the historic centre's role as the primary site of exchange. As businesses consolidate or close, vacant storefronts accumulate, producing a fragmented urban landscape where active units coexist with prolonged inactivity.

Urban retraction here is therefore not marked by physical ruin, but by functional contraction. Streets designed for dense commercial life now operate at a lower rhythm. The photographs document this transition: intact façades, but diminished economic presence. Vacancy becomes both a symptom of shrinkage and a spatial indicator of shifting urban centrality.

In this context, the challenge is not simply to refill empty units, but to recalibrate the scale of commercial activity to match contemporary demand. Recognising this retraction allows intervention to move beyond growth-oriented assumptions and instead focus on selective activation and incremental reuse.

4.9 Social Life in a Fragmented Historic Centre

Echoes of Work, Silence, and the Mountains Beyond

Most of the people I met were between 40 and 60, born and raised in Biella, They are factory workers, rice farmers, café owners, teachers, and a few young people trying to start something new. Their stories describe towns that once moved fast, shaped by work and routine, and that today feel slower, older, quieter. Yet beneath this silence, there is still pride and care for what remains.

"Biella used to make noise," one former textile worker said. **"Machines, trucks, people shouting in the mills. Now it's just wind and pigeons."**

Work once structured everything. textiles were not just employment but identity, passed through generations. Life is calmer, but many described it as too calm, a quiet that feels like something missing.

The absence of young people comes up everywhere. "You notice it at the bar," someone said. "No young faces anymore." Children leave to study or work in Milan or Turin and rarely return. Schools in smaller villages have closed, and entire hillsides are now inhabited mostly by the elderly. **"Every year we say goodbye to our students," a teacher said. "They go away, and that's it."**

When work disappeared, uncertainty followed. "When the mills stopped," one resident explained, **"people didn't just lose jobs, they lost their rhythm."** Some factories were reused as museums or cultural spaces, but many remain empty. Rice farming continues, but with fewer hands. "Two machines now do what twenty people once did," a farmer told me. **"It's not that we don't work," a woman added, "but our work doesn't build anything lasting anymore."**

Aging shapes everyday life. **"The benches are full, the playgrounds are empty,"** someone said. Shops open late and close early. In winter, streets feel frozen. "You hear your footsteps echo," a man in Biella said. While some appreciate the calm, most miss the sense of shared life. "Before, people stayed outside talking," a retired weaver recalled. "Now everyone goes home early."

Services make daily life harder. **"Try living here without a car impossible." Trains are unreliable, buses infrequent, clinics and post offices closed or merged. "The services shrink with the people," one woman said. "Every closure takes a piece of life with it."**

Despite this, identity remains strong. "The old mills aren't ruins," one resident said. "They're memories." In Biella, heritage lives in factories, rivers, and workshops.

Abandonment is visible not forgotten. Vacant factories and farmhouses trigger both loss and imagination. "Every time I pass an empty mill, I think of what it could become," one person said. Ideas exist like studios, schools and agritourism but funding, bureaucracy, and lack of support slow everything down. "We have ideas," a young activist said, "but no push."

When asked what could change, answers were simple: better transport, working services, schools, internet. "We don't need miracles," someone said. "Just basic things that work." Others spoke about mindset. **"We got used to**

to saying we're in decline," "Maybe that's part of the problem." Still, hope survives in small things. "Every workshop that reopens feels like a new heartbeat." Small cultural projects, associations, and cafés keep these towns breathing. "We're not waiting for big investors," a retired man said. "We're waiting for people who care."

Biella tell a northern story of slow transformation. Once driven by work, they are now learning to live with memory, adaptation, and endurance. People here don't talk about revival; they talk about staying.

- **Industrial Memory and the Sound of Work** Residents consistently recall the textile mills as the core of Biella's identity, shaping daily rhythms, social relations, and collective pride.
- **Post-Industrial Silence and Spatial Vacancy** The closure of factories marked not only economic loss but a profound transformation of urban sound, movement, and spatial use.
- **Youth Outmigration and Demographic Aging** The steady departure of younger generations has produced an aging population and a shrinking social base, especially in the hill settlements.
- **Precarious Work & Economic Uncertainty** While work still exists, it no longer offers long-term stability or continuity, weakening the relationship between employment and place.
- **Services, Accessibility, and Peripheral Isolation** Limited public transport, declining services, and car dependency reinforce Biella's sense of isolation within regional networks.
- **Heritage, Identity, and Latent Reuse Potential** Former mills and industrial landscapes are perceived not as ruins, but as repositories of memory and potential future use.

How Residents Understand the Problem

Across the interviews, Biella's decline is described less as a sudden economic failure and more as the long-term result of industrial restructuring and the lack of territorial adaptation. People do not talk in policy terms; they talk about silence, empty factories, slower streets, and the feeling that movement has gradually disappeared.

The end of textile production is seen as a turning point, not only for jobs but for the social rhythm that once held the city together. Outmigration and aging are understood as natural consequences of this break and have become almost normalized. Many interviewees stressed that without stable work, good connections, and r eliable services, it is difficult for younger generations to imagine a future rooted in Biella.

At the same time, there is little desire to return to the past. Residents know the industrial era is over. What they criticize is the absence of a clear long-term vision able to transform industrial heritage into new forms of work and everyday life. Superficial regeneration is met with skepticism, while deeper structural problems remain unresolved.

Taken together, the interviews portray Biella as a city suspended between memory and uncertainty. Shrinkage is not felt only as population loss, but as the gradual disappearance of everyday rhythms. Yet Biella is not seen as finished. Former factories, rivers, and working landscapes still hold identity and belonging. Resilience here is not about growth or optimism, but about endurance, the effort to adapt, to remember, and to keep the city alive after industrial decline.

STRENGTHS

- Rich industrial and religious heritage.
- Strong landscape identity – rivers, rice plains, and alpine valleys with cultural coherence.
- Proximity to urban networks (Turin, Novara, Milan) ensuring regional visibility.
- Active cultural foundations. supporting heritage and landscape projects.
- Enduring craftsmanship tradition and memory of industrial skill.

WEAKNESS

- Persistent population loss and demographic ageing, especially in mountain communes.
- Industrial obsolescence: vacant mills, warehouses, and brownfields along river corridors.
- Fragmented governance between Biella and other province with limited provincial staff.
- Weak recognition of industrial heritage as a cultural asset.
- Decline of commercial activity in town centers, empty shops, reduced social life.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Adaptive reuse of industrial buildings for creative industries, education, and co-working.
- Development of eco-tourism and slow mobility networks
- Branding of "Textile and Water Landscapes" linking agriculture, design, and heritage.Inter-provincial coordination through partnerships.
- Involvement of universities and private foundations in regeneration frameworks.

THREATS

- Economic fragility and lack of stable employment opportunities.
- Flood and landslide risks affecting valleys and riverfront settlements.
- Risk of isolated or event-based regeneration without lasting impact.
- Social disconnection between older and younger generations.
- Ongoing depopulation undermining continuity of local knowledge.

SWOT

4.10 Areas of Decline and Possibilities for Activation

The northern belt of shrinkage encapsulates the paradox of Italian modernity: territories once built on innovation now struggle for renewal.

Challenges remain structural, demographic decline, aged population, fragmented governance, and obsolete industrial infrastructures. The environmental vulnerability of mountain areas, exposed to landslides and floods, adds another layer of fragility.

Yet these same landscapes hold latent opportunities. The abundance of industrial and rural heritage provides an architectural reserve ready for reuse; the coexistence of water systems, forests, and cultural routes allows for ecological regeneration; and the widespread sense of belonging among residents, though quiet, forms a social base for participatory projects.

Emerging potentials can already be traced:

- Industrial Heritage Reuse: initiatives turning mills into museums, art hubs, or co-working spaces.
- Eco-Cultural Corridors: new cycling and walking paths connecting rice fields to mountain sanctuaries along the Sesia River.
- Territorial Branding: Biella as a textile and design capital.
- Educational Networks: partnerships between universities and local schools to revitalise technical training rooted in crafts and sustainability.

To turn these experiments into systemic transformation, governance must act as an enabler rather than an administrator, integrating spatial planning, economic innovation, and heritage conservation into a unified framework.

Ultimately, The province of Biella is not only a site of decline but a potential laboratory of adaptation. The landscapes of water and work, and the silent mills and aging towns, reveal that resilience in shrinking territories is not about returning to growth but about learning to live meaningfully at a smaller scale.

In that sense, Biella mirrors the same fragility and hope seen in Enna, forming the northern reflection of Italy's broader geography of retraction and possible renewal.

4.11 Comparing Shrinkage Conditions Across Cases

Shared Patterns

- Both provinces show persistent population loss, aging structures, and high vacancy in historic cores.
- Heritage assets outlast their communities, creating symbolic but underused landscapes.
- Mobility and governance deficits exacerbate decline despite PNRR/SNAI support. Economic mono-specialisation (agriculture in Enna, industry in Piedmont) leads to fragility once the base collapses.
- Civic actors and universities play a key role in pilot revitalisation efforts

Key Differences

- Spatial DNA: Enna's vertical hill-towns vs Piedmont's linear valley corridors.
- Economic memory: Faith-driven rural culture vs industrial work culture.
- Institutional capacity: Piemont's governance more structured but slow; Sicily's system weaker but socially cohesive.

Overarching Drivers of Shrinkage

- Demographic erosion accelerated by youth outmigration.
- Functional decoupling between heritage cores and contemporary life.
- Institutional fragmentation and slow policy delivery.
- Spatial isolation and weak mobility networks.
- Economic dependence on mono-sectoral models.

Domain	Indicators of Retraction	Latent Assets for Regeneration	Strategic Opportunity
Demographic	High aging index (> 40 %), negative migration balance	Return-migration schemes, remote work potential	Promote in-migration through heritage housing and quality of life narratives
Economic	Deindustrialisation / low innovation	Heritage-based Small Businesses, agro-tourism	Cluster creative economy with territorial branding
Spatial	Underused historic cores	Vacant housing stock	Adaptive reuse / circular building economy
Governance	Fragmented institutions	Existing SNAI–PNRR frameworks	Integrated multi-scalar planning
Cultural	Loss of everyday use of heritage	Strong identity and collective memory	Heritage-led community projects and education

Table 4.4 Analytical Matrix of Shrinkage Conditions

Shared Spatial Challenges Despite Different Contexts

Even though Biella and Enna are located in very different parts of Italy and are shaped by different economic histories, the way shrinkage appears in their historic centres is surprisingly similar. In both cases, decline does not take the form of sudden collapse or large-scale abandonment. Instead, it is experienced as a slow and gradual loss of everyday life. Buildings are still there, streets are still accessible, and the historic fabric remains largely intact, yet the spaces are used less and less over time.

One of the main shared conditions is the growing gap between the demographic reality and the urban form. Both historic centres were built for denser populations and more intense social and economic activity than what they currently support. As the population shrinks and ages, this mismatch becomes visible through vacant buildings, underused housing, and public spaces that are physically present but lack daily social activity.

A similar limitation can also be observed in the way planning frameworks respond to these changes. In Biella, strategies tend to assume recovery through regeneration and revitalisation, often remaining implicitly growth-oriented. In Enna, the focus is instead placed on conservation and protection, with less attention given to adaptation and everyday use. Although these approaches differ in intention, they both struggle to engage directly with shrinkage as a long-term condition affecting the historic centre.

What both cases ultimately show is that shrinkage in medium-sized cities is not an exception or a temporary phase, but a structural and ongoing condition. Whether located within relatively resilient northern territories or in more marginal southern contexts, historic centres face comparable challenges related to underuse, loss of centrality, and declining everyday functions. This convergence suggests the need to move beyond territorial stereotypes and to approach shrinkage as a shared urban condition that requires new planning perspectives across Italy.

The comparison highlights that while the causes of shrinkage differ, its spatial consequences in historic centres converge, pointing toward a common planning challenge for medium-sized cities across Italy.

Policy Engagement

In Enna

In Enna, policy engagement is shaped by a strong emphasis on heritage protection and conservation, reflecting the historic centre's cultural significance and its designation within national and regional planning frameworks. Preservation-oriented instruments have been effective in maintaining physical integrity, but offer limited mechanisms for addressing demographic decline and functional loss.

At the municipal scale, planning approaches prioritize architectural safeguarding and regulatory control, often restricting transformation within the historic centre. While this has prevented large-scale physical degradation, it has also constrained adaptive reuse and everyday inhabitation. As a result, policy engagement tends to preserve buildings while struggling to sustain social and economic life within them.

Enna has been included in national and regional programmes targeting inner areas and marginal territories. These initiatives acknowledge long-term decline and aim to improve accessibility, services, and local economies. However, their impact on the historic centre remains indirect and limited. Interventions are often dispersed, slow to implement, and insufficient to counteract persistent outmigration.

Unlike Biella, shrinkage in Enna is more openly recognized as a long-term condition. However, this recognition does not translate into spatial strategies that reconfigure the historic centre in response to reduced population. Instead, policy engagement remains focused on protection and symbolic valorisation, reinforcing a condition where heritage survives physically but becomes increasingly detached from everyday use.

In Biella

Policy engagement in Biella reflects a partial and indirect recognition of shrinkage, rather than an explicit strategy to manage demographic decline. Planning and regeneration efforts are largely framed through economic revitalisation, cultural reuse, and urban regeneration, often assuming that growth or stabilization can be achieved through targeted interventions.

At the municipal level, planning instruments continue to operate within a growth-oriented framework, where vacant or underused areas are treated as opportunities for redevelopment rather than as long-term conditions of reduced demand. While this approach has supported selective regeneration projects, particularly linked to industrial heritage, cultural institutions, and event-based initiatives, it has not translated into a coherent strategy for the historic centre as a whole.

Biella has engaged with regional and national funding programmes aimed at urban regeneration, innovation, and cultural enhancement. These initiatives have contributed to the reuse of specific buildings and districts, but remain fragmented and project-based, often disconnected from broader demographic trends. As a result, policy engagement tends to address symptoms of decline rather than its structural causes.

Importantly, shrinkage is rarely named explicitly within policy documents. Population decline and ageing are acknowledged, but are not framed as conditions requiring long-term spatial adaptation. This limits the ability of planning tools to respond to reduced residential demand, changing household structures, and the need for flexible reuse within the historic centre. Policy engagement in Biella therefore remains reactive, selective, and largely embedded within traditional regeneration narratives.

Dimension	Enna (South Belt)
Demographic Trend	–15 % (1991–2021); old-age index > 40 % ; youth outmigration dominant
Economic Structure	Agrarian and public sector dominant; low diversification
Urban Form & Morphology	Hill-towns with steep topography, vacant historic cores
Heritage Condition	Medieval-Norman fabric, religious architecture fragile but intact
Governance System	Weak provincial capacity, fragmented implementation of PNRR/SNAI
Mobility & Accessibility	Remote from metropolitan nodes; poor rail and digital links
Community Perception	Sense of loss mixed with faith and place attachment; hope through 1-euro homes and festivals
Policy Engagement	Strong emphasis on heritage protection and conservation
Environmental Context	Mountainous interior; erosion and abandonment of terraces

Biella (North Belt)	Comparative Insights / Common Threads
–10 % (1991–2021); old-age index ≈ 43 %; steady loss of working-age population	Both show chronic shrinkage and aging; structural rather than cyclical decline.
Post-industrial transition; collapsed textile and rice economies	Different origins (southern marginality vs northern deindustrialisation) → same outcome of job erosion.
Linear valley towns with industrial river corridors	Both retain dense historic cores now underused; vacancy > 30 %.
Industrial heritage and Sacri Monti complexes underused yet preserved	Heritage is architecturally sound but functionally hollow in both cases.
Stronger institutional network (Region + GAL + Unioni Montane) but slow integration	Institutional fragmentation and bureaucracy remain shared barriers.
Peripheral to Turin/Milan flows; declining rail connectivity to valleys	Accessibility gap is the spatial driver of shrinkage in both territories.
Quiet resilience through local craft revival and reuse initiatives	Emotional resilience exists but needs institutional support to convert into action.
Economic revitalisation, cultural reuse, and urban regeneration	Both benefit from national schemes but lack continuity and monitoring.
Alpine valley exposed to flooding and landslides	Climate-risk adds pressure to already shrinking territories.

Table 4.5 Comparative Matrix - Enna vs Biella





Chapter V

From Diagnosis to Strategy: A Transferable Framework

5.1 From Diagnosis to Defining Planning Strategy:
Beyond Regeneration: Strategy as Territorial Stewardship

In contexts, of long-term urban shrinkage, conventional regeneration frameworks become insufficient. Regeneration is typically oriented toward reversal, reactivating growth, attracting new populations, or restoring previous levels of urban intensity. While such approaches may succeed in expanding or transitioning cities, they risk misreading decline as a temporary malfunction rather than a structural condition.

The strategy hypothesis proposed here departs from this logic. It does not seek to reverse shrinkage, nor to "revitalise" historic centres through episodic projects. Instead, it reframes planning as a form of **long-term territorial stewardship**, a continuous process of care, prioritisation, and selective transformation aimed at maintaining spatial quality and social meaning under conditions of demographic contraction.

Within this perspective, strategy is not measured by growth or visibility, but by durability. Success lies in stabilising everyday life, preventing further erosion of the urban fabric, and aligning institutions, heritage, and services with a reduced but persistent demand. This shift is particularly necessary in medium-sized historic centres, where neither metropolitan regeneration tools nor village-scale revival models are adequate.

Shrinkage as a Political and Strategic Vacuum

The analysis developed in the previous chapters shows that the problems faced by historic centres in medium-sized Italian cities cannot be explained through demographic decline alone. Shrinkage is not just a matter of numbers, but the visible outcome of a deeper institutional and strategic gap. Cities such as Biella and Enna do not clearly fit within the territorial categories that structure national and regional policies. They are not metropolitan centres driving growth, but neither are they small villages or Borghi targeted by inner-area programmes.

As a result, these cities remain in a form of regulatory limbo. **Decline is acknowledged but rarely governed.** Most policy frameworks still rely on simplified oppositions, growth versus marginality, competitiveness versus assistance, which leave medium-sized cities without specific tools to address long-term contraction. Shrinkage is therefore treated as a temporary condition to be reversed, rather than as a structural process shaping these territories over decades.

This lack of recognition is not neutral. It **produces fragmented and often inconsistent interventions**, delayed responses, and a growing mismatch between local needs and national policy ambitions. Medium-sized cities are left to manage decline without a coherent strategic framework.

The Erosion of Everyday Life in Historic Centres Fieldwork in Biella and Enna highlights a transformation that goes beyond population loss, the gradual erosion of everyday life. Shrinkage becomes visible not only through empty buildings, but through the disappearance of daily practices that once sustained the social and symbolic role of historic centres.

The **closure of schools, shops, health services, and civic facilities has weakened the rhythms that structured daily life**. These spaces functioned as informal social infrastructures, supporting encounters, routines, and a sense of belonging. As they disappear, historic centres risk becoming functionally hollow, physically intact but increasingly detached from everyday use.

Depopulation in this context becomes self-reinforcing. Residents, particularly younger ones, leave not only due to limited job opportunities, but because historic centres no longer operate as complete living environments. The loss of services signals a withdrawal of public commitment, redefining these areas as spaces to pass through or visit rather than places to inhabit.

Heritage at Risk: From Passive Conservation to Productive Use

In shrinking cities, the presence of extensive historic and architectural heritage adds further complexity. **While often described as an asset, heritage can become a structural burden when local resources decline, and maintenance costs increase.** Many restoration efforts remain focused on physical conservation, without a clear vision for long-term use.

The analysis points to the prevalence of passive conservation, where buildings are preserved as isolated objects, detached from social and economic functions. In these conditions, restoration risks producing technically recovered but underused spaces, reinforcing vacancy rather than counteracting decline.

As an alternative, this research proposes a shift towards productive and conditional conservation. This approach recognises that not all heritage can or should be preserved in the same way. Strategic choices are required to prioritise buildings and spaces that can realistically support housing, services, care, cultural activities, or local economies, while accepting transformation, and in some cases loss, in other parts of the historic fabric.

Accepting Decline: Toward a Smart Shrinkage Planning Paradigm

A central contribution of this study is the rejection of growth-oriented planning as the default response to decline. In Biella and Enna, decades of policies aimed at reversing demographic trends have produced limited results and often postponed necessary adaptations. The persistent pursuit of growth has prevented cities from confronting shrinkage as a long-term condition.

This research instead supports a shift towards smart shrinkage, understood not as resignation, but as an active planning approach. Accepting decline allows planning to move away from expansion and towards care, consolidation, and selective transformation of the urban fabric.

International experiences, such as Leipzig, show how vacancy management, selective demolition, and the reprogramming of empty spaces can stabilise shrinking cities. However, Italian historic centres require adapted

approaches due to their dense fabric, cultural value, and regulatory constraints. In Italia di Mezzo, smart shrinkage implies managing vacancy, reducing oversupply, concentrating services, and rebalancing built and open spaces, rather than pursuing unrealistic growth trajectories.

Scaling the Response: Inter-Municipal Governance as a Missing Layer

A recurring limitation that emerges from the research is the fragmentation of local action. Individual municipalities are often expected to manage complex regeneration processes despite having limited administrative capacity and continuously shrinking resources. At the same time, national programmes such as the PNRR operate at scales and levels of complexity that are difficult to translate into everyday local realities.

Therefore inter-municipal governance is a crucial missing layer between the local and national scales. Medium-sized cities and their surrounding territories already function as interconnected systems, sharing mobility networks, services, labour markets, and ecological structures that clearly extend beyond municipal boundaries.

Strengthening cooperation between neighbouring municipalities makes it possible to share technical expertise and planning offices, coordinate the provision of services across territories, develop infrastructural and ecological corridors, and reduce competition for limited funding. Rather than acting in isolation, municipalities can pool resources and build collective capacity.

This approach is particularly relevant for Italia di Mezzo, where cities are neither isolated nor fully metropolitan, but embedded within dense networks of small towns, landscapes, and everyday territorial relationships. In this context, inter-municipal cooperation becomes not only a governance option, but a necessary condition for managing shrinkage in a realistic and sustainable way.

Why These Strategies Matter Beyond the Case Studies

Historic centres in medium-sized Italian cities are commonly addressed through planning approaches that continue to assume recovery, growth, or functional reintegration within wider urban systems. It is shaped by long-term demographic decline, ageing populations, and the selective withdrawal of economic and social functions.

Within historic centres, these processes do not unfold uniformly. Instead, they materialise through fragmented patterns of vacancy, underuse, and social weakening, often embedded within otherwise intact urban fabric. This unevenness challenges both growth-oriented regeneration models and purely conservation-based approaches. Comprehensive regeneration strategies risk over-investment and displacement, while passive preservation frameworks tend to overlook the everyday dynamics that sustain historic environments.

As a result, **historic centres under shrinkage require strategies oriented less toward transformation and more toward management, privileging selective and incremental action over comprehensive redevelopment.**

From Recognition to Strategic Targeting within Historic Centres

The preceding analytical chapters have highlighted how demographic decline, functional loss, and heritage value intersect spatially within historic centres. Rather than affecting the historic core, shrinkage produces differentiated internal conditions, where areas of relative continuity coexist with zones of advanced decline. **Recognising this internal differentiation is a necessary step in moving from analysis to strategy.**

In this research, recognition does not aim to classify or label neighbourhoods, but to identify where strategic action can be most effective. This leads to the identification of concentration zones of action: limited portions of the historic centre where demographic fragility, functional underuse, and heritage presence overlap. These zones are not conceived as fixed planning boundaries, but as operational units through which strategies can be tested, calibrated, and adjusted over time.

Differentiating Shrinkage Conditions: Two Types of Concentration Zones

Within the identified concentration zones, two recurrent spatial conditions emerge.

- **Typology A:** consists of **inhabited but shrinking areas**, where a resident population and forms of everyday social life remain present, but in weakened form. These areas are characterised by ageing populations, partial vacancy, and declining services, yet they continue to function as lived environments.
- **Typology B:** corresponds to **areas of advanced abandonment**, where long-term vacancy prevails, social life is largely absent, and buildings are often structurally intact but unused.

This distinction is not intended to establish a hierarchy of value or urgency. Rather, it acknowledges that different degrees of occupation and use require different modes of intervention. Applying uniform actions across these conditions would risk either reinforcing decline or misdirecting resources. Differentiation, instead, allows actions to be tailored while remaining embedded within a shared strategic framework.

A Heritage-Management Strategy Framework

Rather than proposing a fixed set of design solutions, the strategy is articulated as a heritage management framework grounded in selectivity, reversibility, and adaptability. Heritage is understood here as a living system that requires ongoing care, prioritisation, and adjustment to conditions of reduced demand.

Within this framework, actions are conceived as modular and repeatable, capable of being applied across different contexts and scaled according to local capacity. The framework operates through a limited number of action categories addressing everyday functions, livelihoods, residential adaptation, temporary use, and public space. While the form and intensity of these actions vary between concentration zones, their underlying logic remains consistent, ensuring coherence across the historic centre.

5.2 From Framework to Ground: A place-based translation

The application of the strategic framework to Enna and Biella is not intended as a demonstration of effectiveness in absolute terms, but as a place-based verification of strategic coherence. While both cities experience comparable dynamics of demographic decline and functional contraction, the historic centres operate under distinct spatial, institutional, and temporal conditions.

For this reason, the strategies are not transferred as fixed solutions, but translated through local parameters, allowing their internal logic to be tested against different urban configurations. Reliability is therefore understood not as uniform performance, but as the capacity of the framework to remain operative when confronted with divergent contexts.

Enna

In Enna, shrinkage is expressed primarily through **stability without renewal**. The historic centre remains physically continuous and symbolically central, yet increasingly disconnected from demographic and economic reproduction. Vacancy accumulates slowly, and transformation pressures are limited. Accordingly, the tailored strategy privileges stabilisation and institutional anchoring, with selective and spatially concentrated reuse. Rather than seeking rapid activation, interventions are calibrated to preserve continuity, prevent further deterioration, and reinforce long-term public presence.

The historic centre of Enna represents a condition of advanced demographic contraction combined with strong physical permanence. While the urban fabric remains largely intact, prolonged underuse and limited private investment have progressively reduced its functional intensity. Shrinkage here manifests less through abandonment than through immobility, requiring strategies that prioritise continuity over transformation.

Spatial reading

- Compact and continuous historic fabric
- Steep topography and limited accessibility
- High proportion of residential vacancy
- Strong presence of public and institutional buildings

Strategic orientation

The application of the strategy framework in Enna focuses on stabilising the existing urban structure and reinforcing long-term anchors. Actions are spatially selective and institutionally driven, avoiding diffuse activation that would exceed local absorption capacity. Adaptive reuse is concentrated around key nodes, while peripheral or fragile areas are managed through maintenance and prevention of further decline.

*In Enna, strategic reliability is achieved through **durability, continuity, and controlled transformation.***

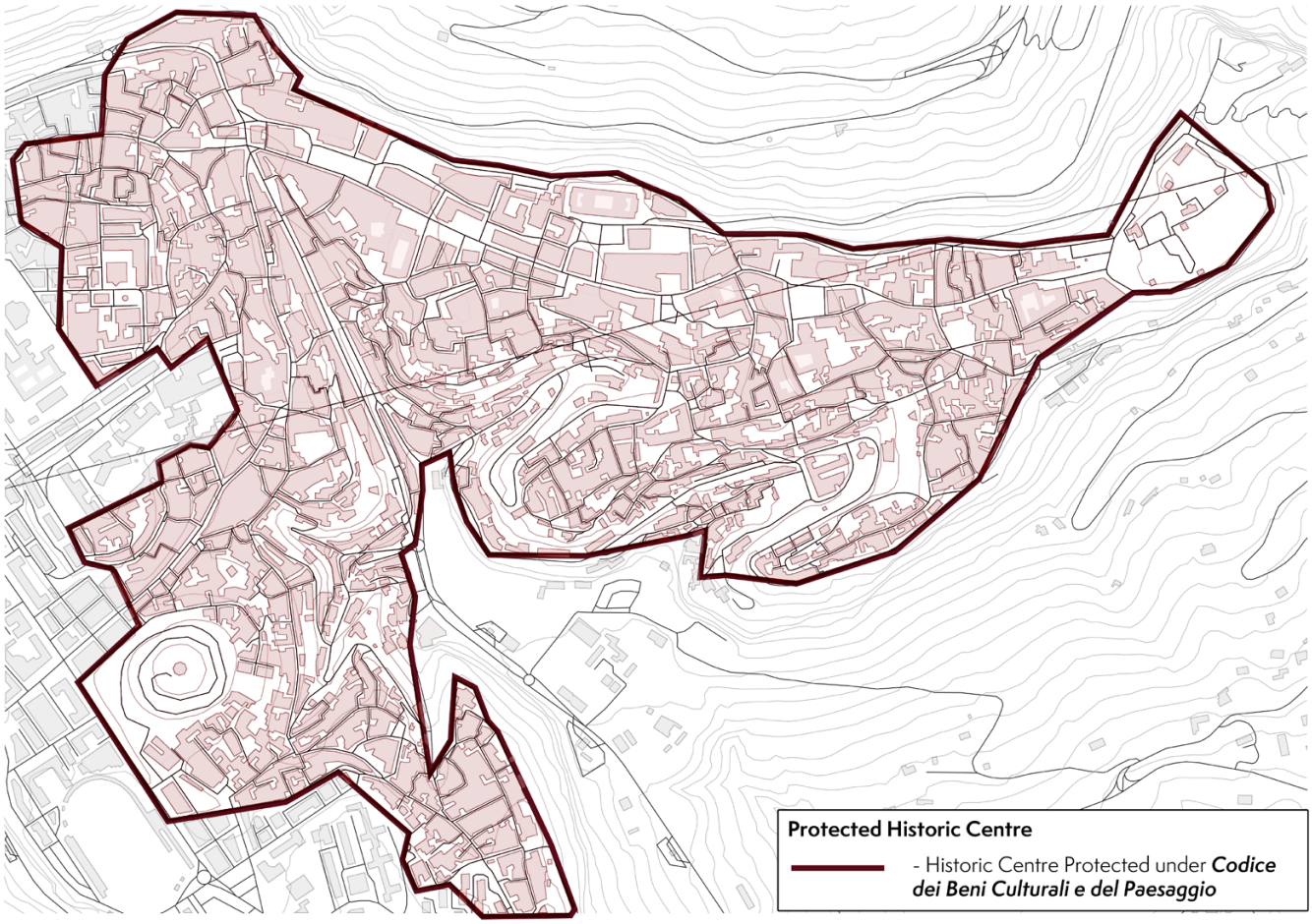


Fig 5.1 Historic centre protection category

Source: www.comune.enna.it

The historic centre of Enna operates within the regulatory framework of the ***Codice dei Beni Culturali e del Paesaggio***, which establishes the national system for the protection and enhancement of cultural and landscape heritage. Beyond individual monuments, the Code extends its scope to historic urban fabrics that hold collective cultural value, meaning that the protection of Enna's centre applies not only to listed buildings but to the broader morphological structure of streets, façades, and public spaces. Any intervention affecting this fabric requires authorisation from the Soprintendenza and must demonstrate compatibility with heritage values. As a result, transformation within the historic centre is structurally constrained, and strategies addressing shrinkage must operate through adaptive reuse, incremental rehabilitation, and selective management rather than large-scale redevelopment.

Within this regulatory framework, interventions in the historic centre are subject to significant limitations. Structural demolition, and selected structure, volumetric expansion, alteration of building heights, and modification of historic façades are generally restricted or require strict authorisation. The replacement of traditional materials, changes to roof typologies, or the alteration of window proportions are typically not permitted if they compromise the historic character of the urban fabric. Large-scale redevelopment approaches are therefore structurally incompatible with the conservation regime. However, adaptive reuse of existing buildings, interior reconfiguration that does not affect protected elements, restoration works, façade maintenance, and reversible or temporary installations in public space remain feasible when designed in accordance with heritage guidelines.

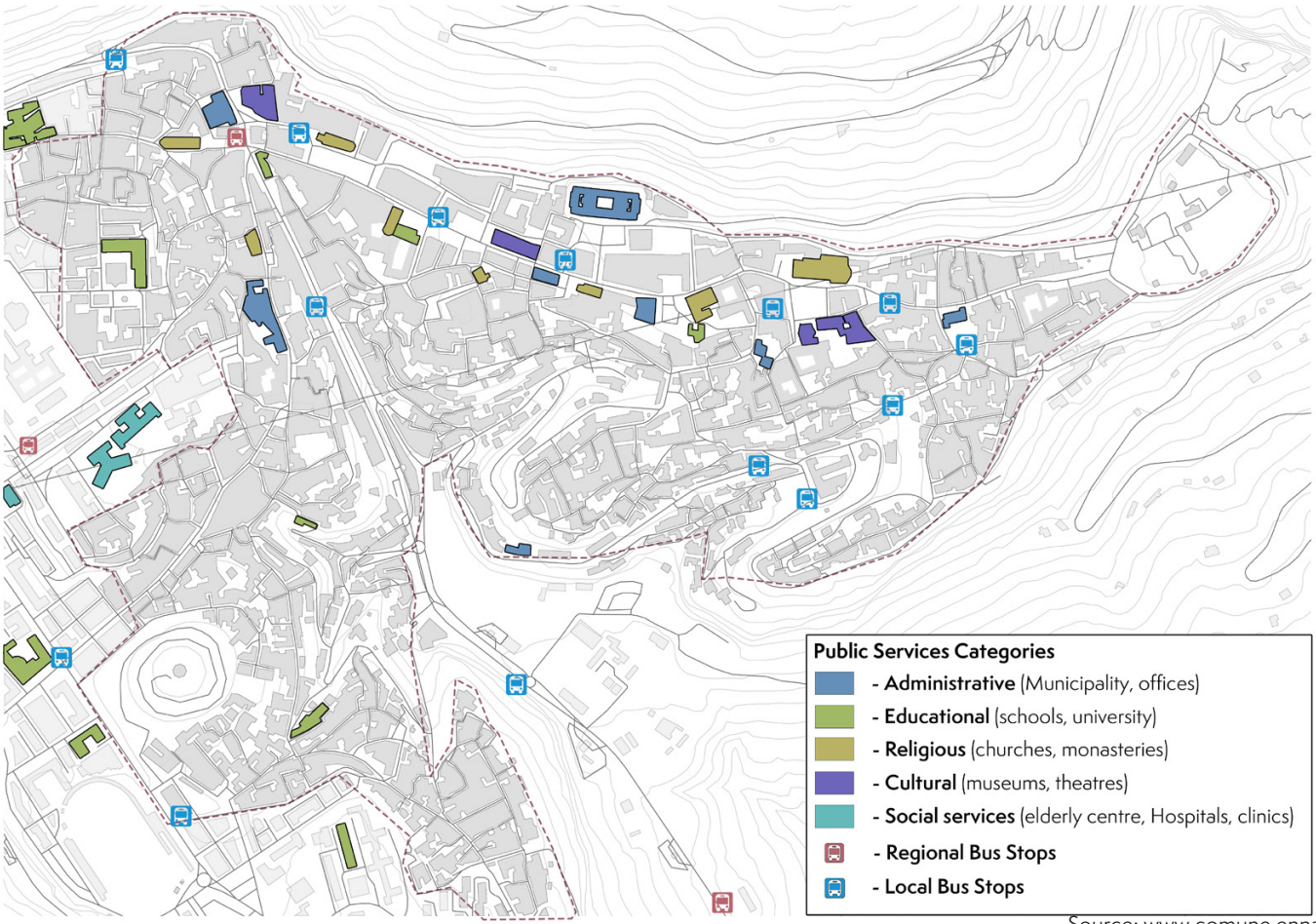


Fig 5.2 Public Services in Historic centre- Enna

Source: www.comune.enna.it
Author's Eloboration
Based on site visit, Enna, 2025.

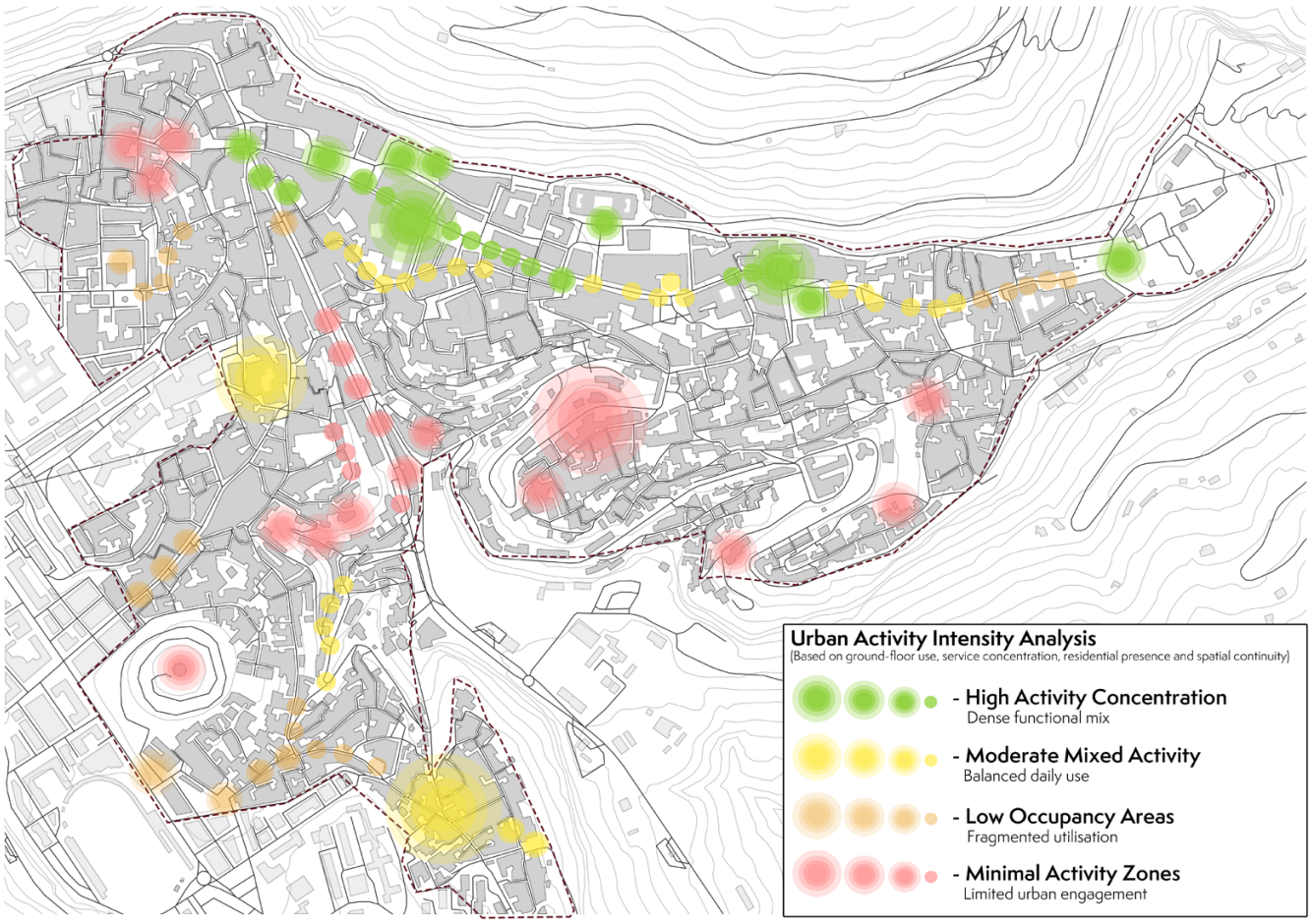


Fig 5.3 Urban Activity Intensity Analysis in Historic Centre- Enna

Source: Author's Eloboration
Based on site visit, Enna, 2025.

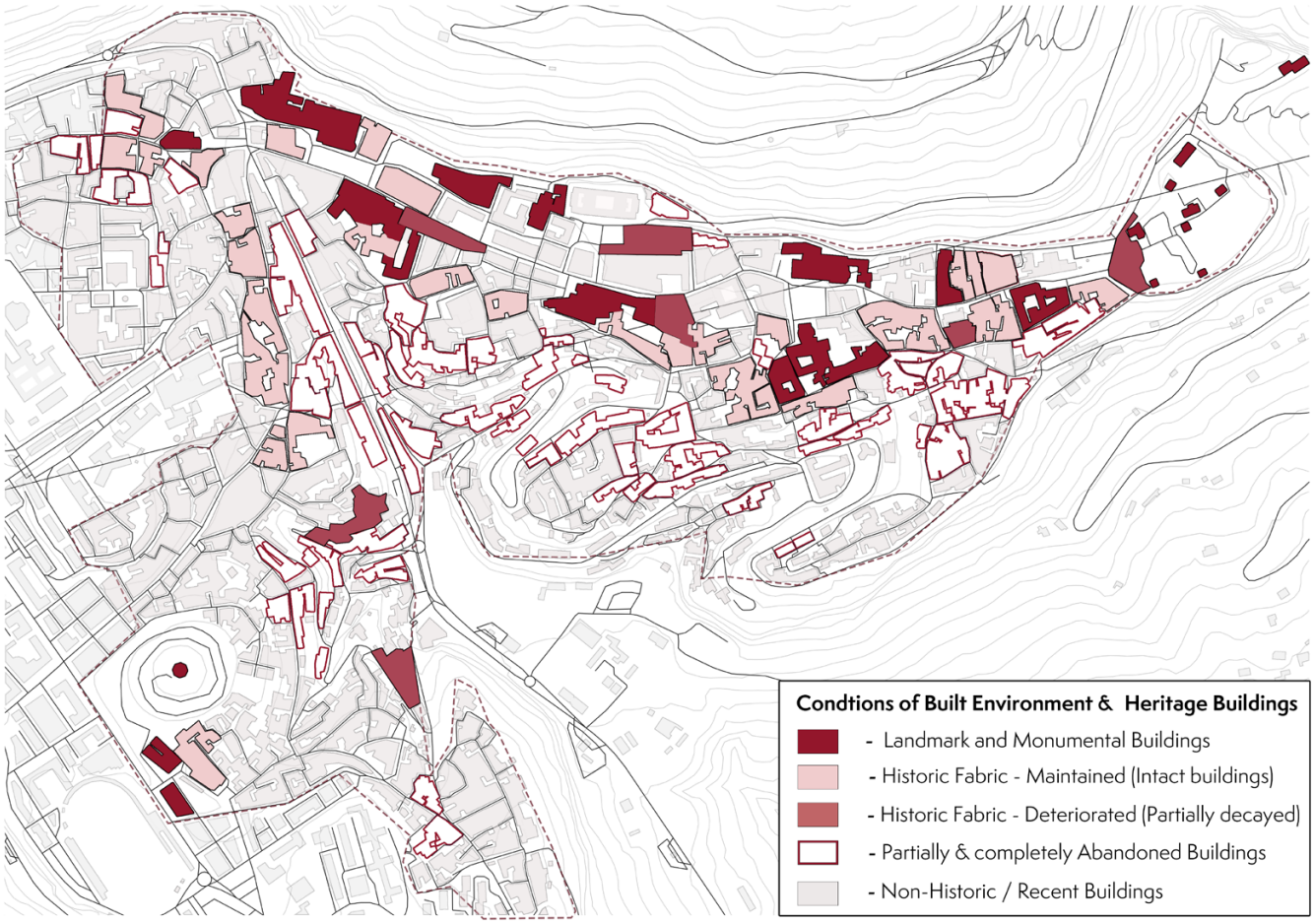


Fig 5.4 Infrastructural conditions & Heritage buildings -Enna

Source: www.comune.enna.it
Author's Eloboration
Based on site visit, Enna, 2025.

The mapping of heritage buildings alongside infrastructure decay and abandonment reveals a critical spatial contradiction within the historic centre. While the area is comprehensively protected under the framework of the Codice dei Beni Culturali e del Paesaggio, the physical condition of many structures demonstrates varying degrees of deterioration, underuse, or complete vacancy. In several sectors, protected or historically significant buildings coexist with inactive ground floors, compromised facades, and weakened urban infrastructure. This overlap exposes the structural tension between regulatory rigidity and economic fragility.

The protection regime limits demolition, volumetric alteration, and large-scale transformation, yet it does not automatically guarantee maintenance or active use. As a result, conservation operates within a shrinking socio economic context where private investment is limited and demographic decline reduces functional demand. The map therefore highlights zones where heritage value is high but functional vitality is low, identifying areas in which preservation alone is insufficient to ensure urban continuity.

Rather than interpreting protection as an obstacle, this condition reframes intervention as a process of adaptive reuse, incremental rehabilitation, and targeted activation. The coexistence of protected fabric and infrastructural decay justifies a selective strategy focused on stabilising vulnerable clusters, reactivating underused heritage buildings, and concentrating resources where conservation and revitalisation must operate simultaneously. In this sense, the heritage and decay mapping does not merely document decline, but establishes the spatial logic through which intervention areas are defined.

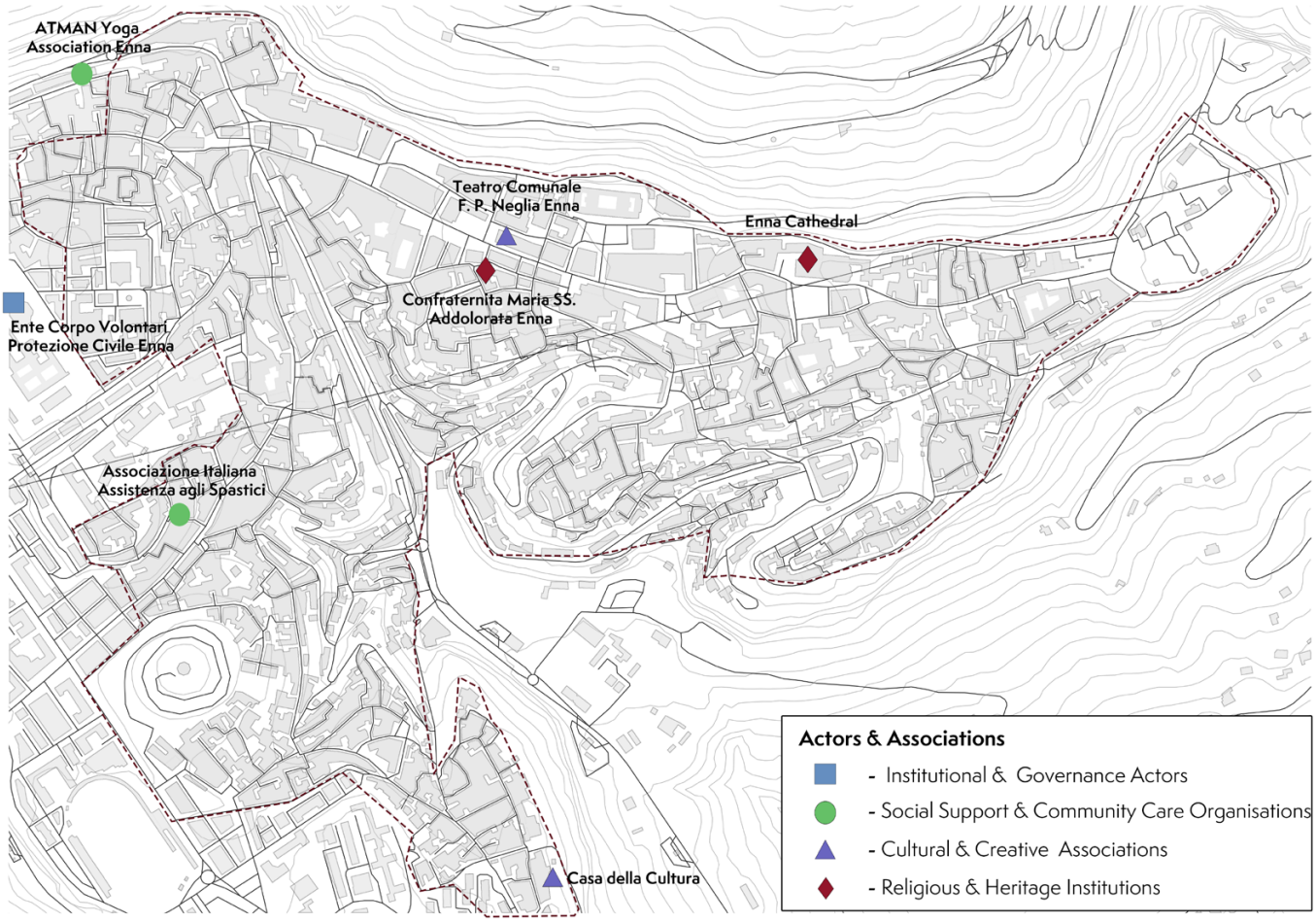


Fig 5.5 Actors and Associations Network- Enna

Source: Author's Eloboration
Based on site visit, Enna, 2025.

The revitalisation of Enna's historic centre cannot rely solely on physical interventions, but depends fundamentally on the mobilisation of local institutional, social, and cultural actors. The Comune di Enna plays a central coordinating role, enabling adaptive reuse processes, facilitating regulatory approvals within the protected urban fabric, and allocating public assets for strategic activation. Without municipal support, even small-scale interventions remain structurally limited.

Alongside formal governance, local associations represent an operational layer capable of translating spatial proposals into everyday activity. Social support organisations and volunteer networks contribute to community resilience, particularly in a context marked by ageing and depopulation, ensuring that interventions respond to real social needs. Cultural and creative associations, both within and beyond the historic centre, provide the capacity for programming, temporary activation, and the reuse of vacant ground floors, transforming underused spaces into recurring nodes of activity. Heritage and religious institutions, embedded within the historic fabric, act as symbolic anchors that periodically reactivate public space and reinforce collective identity.

Together, these actors form a local ecosystem that can sustain incremental and project-based interventions. Rather than introducing external models of regeneration, the proposal builds upon existing capacities, connecting governance structures, civic associations, and cultural institutions to targeted intervention zones. In this sense, revitalisation is framed not as large-scale transformation, but as a coordinated and actor-driven process rooted in the social and institutional fabric of the city.

Actor / Association	Category	Spatial Relevance in Historic Centre	Potential Role in Interventions	Strategic Value for Shrinkage Management
Comune di Enna	Institutional & Civic	Administrative authority over historic centre	Regulatory approvals, zoning control, heritage coordination, public building allocation, funding applications	Central coordinating actor; enables or constrains all spatial interventions
Ente Corpo Volontari Protezione Civile Enna	Institutional & Civic	Operates within municipal territory	Support temporary uses, emergency management for vacant buildings, event logistics	Increases operational capacity for fragile spaces
ANCE Enna	Institutional / Professional	Links to construction & planning sector	Technical advisory role for adaptive reuse, building rehabilitation	Bridges private investment and public regeneration
Associazione Italiana Assistenza agli Spastici	Social Support	Provides social care services	Anchor inclusive community hubs within vacant buildings	Strengthens social resilience in ageing population
Patronato Enas	Social Support	Welfare mediation services	Provide outreach programs in intervention zones	Prevents social desertification
O.n.G. Coordinamento Regionale Volontariato e Solidarietà Luciano Lama Onlus	Civic / Volunteer	Regional solidarity network	Mobilise volunteers for temporary activations and community programs	Enhances low-cost activation capacity
ENDAS Enna	Social / Cultural	Hosts sport & cultural events	Activate underused public spaces with programming	Reintroduces regular urban vitality
Casa della Cultura	Cultural & Creative	Civic arts presence	Transform vacant heritage buildings into cultural nodes	Cultural-led regeneration anchor
Teatro Comunale F. P. Neglia	Heritage & Cultural	Central cultural landmark	Anchor cultural corridor strategy	Strengthens symbolic centre identity
Centro Urbano Enna – Museo delle Confraternite	Heritage	Embedded in historic fabric	Link tourism & local identity projects	Converts heritage into economic activation
Duomo di Enna & Confraternite	Heritage & Religious	Highly central, ritual nodes	Organise public events, religious festivals activating streets	Periodic activation of public realm
ATMAN Yoga Association Enna	Community Wellbeing	Small-scale local presence	Activate micro-spaces, temporary reuse of vacant interiors	Encourages everyday urban presence
Associazione di Quartiere "A Chiazza"	Neighbourhood Association	Grassroots scale	Co-manage public space improvements	Strengthens bottom-up governance
Associazione culturale Magma	Cultural & Creative	Via Roma presence	Creative reuse of vacant shops, workshops, youth engagement	Attracts younger demographic
Associazione Laberna APS	Cultural / Gastronomic	Workshop & food culture activities	Activate commercial corridors with experiential events	Supports small-scale economic revival
Associazione La Rupe – Centro Studi e Ricerche sulle Tradizioni Popolari APS	Cultural Heritage	Folklore & traditions	Connect heritage to contemporary programming	Reinforces identity without over-commercialisation

Table5.1 Actors/ Associations Matrix - Enna

"Local actors play a crucial role in revitalising the historic centre by translating ***spatial interventions into sustained social, cultural, and institutional activity*** *rooted in the existing urban fabric."*

Spatial Layering and Selection of Intervention Areas in the Historic Centre

The identification of intervention areas within the historic centre of Enna is grounded in a layered spatial analysis that examines the structural, functional, and social dimensions of urban shrinkage. Rather than approaching the centre as a homogeneous entity, a series of thematic maps were developed to understand how fragility and potential are unevenly distributed across the fabric.

The first layer documents the distribution of public and institutional buildings, revealing **the concentration of administrative, religious, and cultural anchors within specific corridors of the centre.** While these civic structures provide symbolic and functional stability, peripheral areas appear institutionally weak, lacking consistent public presence. This uneven distribution establishes an initial spatial distinction between supported and unsupported sectors.

The second layer analyses active and inactive ground-floor uses, mapping commercial vitality alongside vacant storefronts and underused premises. The results demonstrate a **fragmented pattern of activity, where limited corridors of life coexist with pockets of commercial desertification.** This differentiation challenges the idea of total decline and instead highlights selective zones of functional collapse.

A third layer assesses heritage buildings and their physical condition, distinguishing between maintained structures, moderate decay, and advanced deterioration. In several areas, high heritage value overlaps with structural fragility, exposing **the tension between conservation constraints and economic weakness.** This condition limits transformative redevelopment while simultaneously demanding careful adaptive reuse strategies.

Accessibility and topography constitute another critical dimension. Given Enna's elevated morphology, steep gradients and **limited permeability reinforce spatial isolation in certain sectors,** further amplifying patterns of inactivity. The mapping of pedestrian routes and circulation barriers reveals how physical constraints intensify socio-economic fragility.

Finally, the distribution of social, cultural, and community associations was mapped to understand the presence of local actors within the historic fabric. **While heritage based institutions remain spatially embedded, contemporary social infrastructure appears more dispersed and limited,** suggesting gaps in everyday activation despite the presence of symbolic landmarks.

The overlay of these layers produces a composite reading of the centre, where cumulative vulnerability emerges at the intersection of vacancy, decay, limited accessibility, and weak institutional presence. Conversely, areas where underused buildings are located near civic anchors or active corridors reveal latent opportunity. **The selected intervention zones therefore result from the spatial convergence of constraint and potential.** They represent areas where targeted, incremental, and governance-supported actions can realistically operate within the regulatory framework of the protected historic centre, concentrating limited resources where they can generate the greatest structural impact.

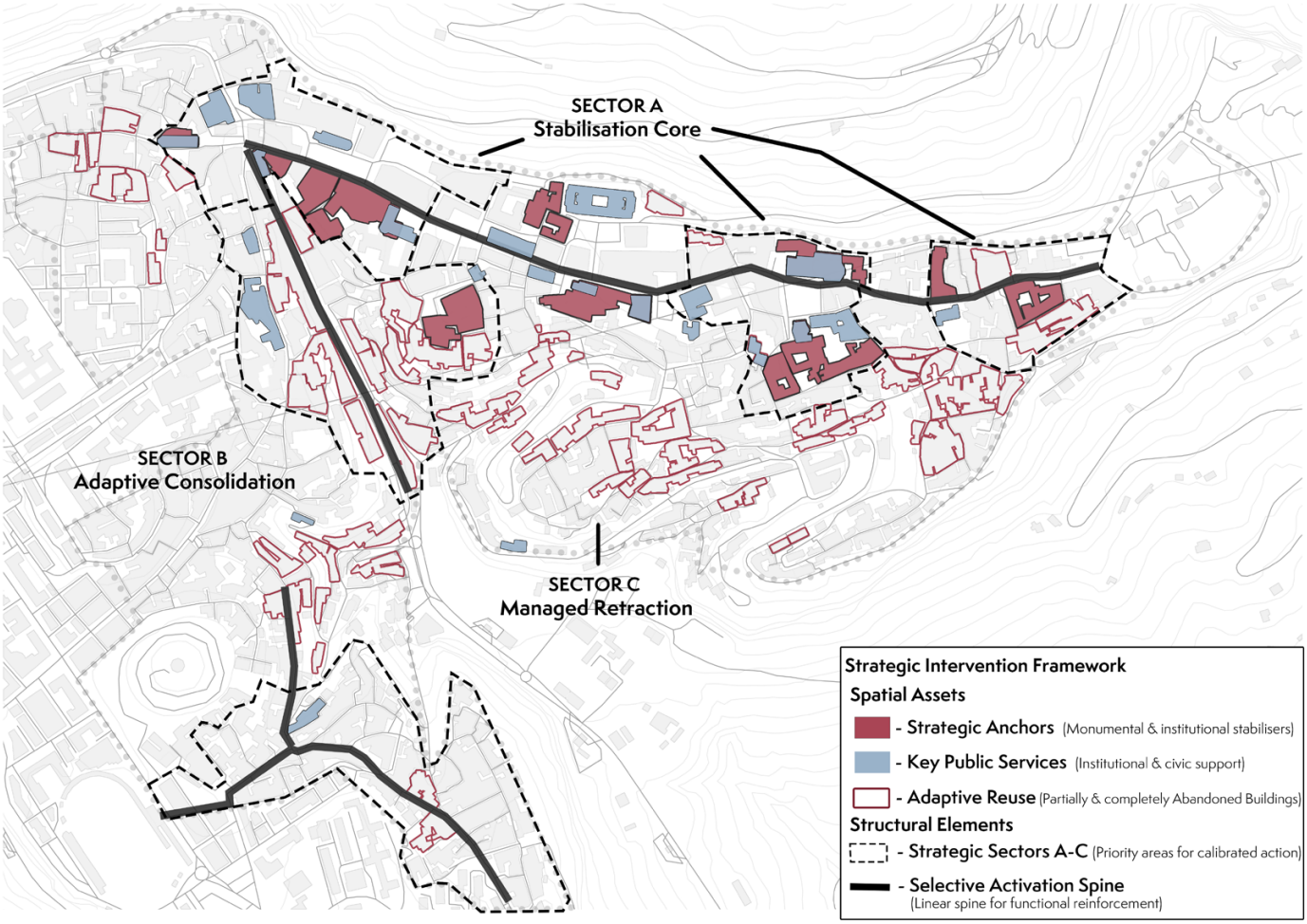


Fig 5.6 Enna - Strategy Intervention area map



SHORT TERM (0-3 yrs)

Reactivation & Safeguarding

Micro-hub, craft strip and stewardship agreements make the historic centre feel less empty and more cared for in daily life.

MEDIUM TERM (3 - 7 yrs)

Selective Concentration & Adaptive Reuse

A compact network of lived places (ridge hub, craft street, civic spine) stabilises activity while peripheral blocks are safely maintained as curated non-use.

LONG TERM (7 - 15 yrs)

Institutional Anchoring & Stewardship

The centre functions at a smaller scale but with coherent anchors, concentrated services and a normalised practice of stewardship under structural shrinkage.

*In Enna, short-term actions focus on **preventing further loss**, while long-term outcomes prioritise* **durable institutional presence** *and **controlled continuity**, rather than growth.*

Fig 5.7 Enna - Timeline

Enna: Local Actions for Stabilisation
E1 : Neighbourhood Micro-Hub (Typology A)

This action reinforces everyday life along the Castello-Duomo ridge by consolidating an underused square as a small civic anchor. Rather than introducing new large-scale functions, it **strengthens existing institutional and religious presence through modest, reversible interventions**. The aim is to stabilise social rhythms and maintain residential continuity in a sector where life persists but remains fragile. It represents selective concentration at a neighbourhood scale.

Main moves

- Light traffic calming and removal of some parking bays to create a more pedestrian square with benches, trees in planters and shaded areas.
- Reactivation of 1-2 vacant ground floors as shared rooms for after-school support, elderly daytime use or small cultural activities, managed by associations and parish groups.
- Simple, repeatable events (cineforum, talks, reading circles) co-organised with Università Kore and local associations.

Strategic role

Stabilises a Typology A area where social life persists but is fragile, and links heritage spaces to everyday uses rather than occasional tourism.

Key actors

Comune di Enna, parish and confraternities, Università Kore di Enna, local cultural and social associations, small businesses on the ridge.





Reactivation of an underused square *along the Castello-Duomo ridge to host basic services and small cultural activities for everyday neighbourhood life.*

Fig 5.8-5.10 Neighborhood Micro Hub

Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Enna, 2025.

E2 :"Laboratori di Pelle": Live-Work Craft Strip (Typology A)

This strategy reuses a short sequence of vacant ground floors and upper levels as live-work units linked to **small-scale craft production**. By tying heritage space to local livelihoods, **the action sustains residential presence and everyday maintenance of the built fabric**. It avoids growth-driven regeneration and instead supports incremental economic continuity within Zone A. Production becomes a tool for inhabitation rather than expansion.

Main moves

- Selection of 4-6 contiguous units in good structural condition, internal adaptation only, with protected façades.
- Live-work typologies: workshop at ground floor, living or co-living above, with moderated rents and basic support.
- Shared "atelier collettivo" fronting the street as a common display and sales space.

Strategic role

Implements Typology A logic: everyday production keeps the historic fabric maintained and inhabited, countering purely tourist, intermittent uses.

Key actors

Comune di Enna, Soprintendenza, local artisans and young professionals, Area Interna Troina-Nebrodi / GAL, cooperatives for management and promotion.





***Adaptive reuse of vacant ground floors and upper level**s as live-work craft spaces to sustain local production and residential presence in the historic centre.*

Fig 5.11-5.14 Areas for Live work Craft Strip

Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Enna, 2025.

E3: Stewardship and "Curated Non-Use" (Typology B)

Not all parts of the historic centre can or should be reactivated. This action defines specific blocks where the priority shifts from transformation to care, safety, and minimal consolidation. Through **selective retraction and stewardship, resources are concentratedwhere impact is viable**, while peripheral or structurally fragile areas are stabilised without forced reuse. The strategy accepts long-term shrinkage as a structural condtion. This is not abandonment, but managed temporal reserve.

Main moves

- Identification of specific peripheral blocks as Typology B stewardship areas, based on vacancy, decay and topographic difficulty.
- Minimal consolidation works (roof patching, securing façades, closing openings) to prevent collapse and risk.
- "Patti di cura" between municipality, owners and volunteer groups for periodic cleaning, inspection and occasional low-impact uses (heritage walks, processions, open-house days).

Strategic role

Materialises Typology B: Enna accepts that some sectors will remain largely empty, but keeps them safe and symbolically connected, preserving options for future reuse.

Key actors

Comune di Enna, Soprintendenza, property owners, volunteer associations, civil protection and neighbourhood groups.

Designation of fragile peripheral blocks as stewardship areas with ***minimal consolidation and periodic care*** *instead of forced reoccupation.*



Fig 5.15-5.18 Areas Curated No use

Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Enna, 2025.

E4 : Civic Spine Recalibration (Typology A)

This action rebalances the main municipal corridor by prioritising pedestrian continuity, public space quality, and institutional visibility. Instead of functioning primarily as a traffic route, the corridor becomes a connective civic spine linking key concentration areas. **Small spatial adjustments and traffic moderation reinforce its role as an everyday structuring element within the shrinking historic centre.**

Main moves

- Progressive reallocation of part of on-street parking to seating, trees and small kiosks operated by social cooperatives or local businesses.
- Periodic "giorni senz'auto" linked to markets or public events, testing temporary pedestrianisation and new uses.
- Improved pedestrian links between the municipal corridor, nearby squares and commercial streets through clear surfaces, lighting and signage.

Strategic role

Strengthens a Typology A area with strong institutional presence but weak everyday intensity, shifting from a traffic corridor to a civic spine with visible, accessible public life.

Key actors

Comune di Enna, local police and mobility office, neighbourhood shops and bars, social cooperatives operating kiosks or small services.



Incremental transformation *of a car-dominated municipal corridor into a civic spine with calmer traffic, small kiosks and more accessible public space.*

Fig 5.19-5.22 Rebalancing Municipal Corridor

Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Enna, 2025.

Action	Intent	Spatial Focus	Type of Intervention	Key Actors	Governance Scale	Expected Outcome	Timeframe
E1 – Neighbourhood Service Micro Hub	Reinforce everyday life around heritage ridge	Underused square along Castello–Duomo ridge	Public space rebalancing + adaptive reuse of 1–2 ground floors	Institutional: Comune di Enna Religious: Parish & confraternities Educational: Università Kore Local: Associations, nearby businesses	Municipal + Historic Centre level	Increased daily presence, social stabilisation, stronger link between heritage and routine life	Short term (1–3 years)
E2 – Laboratori di Pelle Live–Work Strip	Connect heritage conservation with local production and housing	Street segment with clustered vacancy	Adaptive reuse + moderated rent scheme	Institutional: Comune di Enna, Soprintendenza Supralocal: Area Interna / GAL Local: Artisans, cooperatives	Municipal + Supralocal + Regolamento edilizio	Economic stabilisation, reduced vacancy, continuous building maintenance	Medium term (3-7 years)
E3 – Stewardship & Curated Non-Use	Manage long-term vacancy through containment and care	Peripheral fragile blocks	Minimal consolidation + "patti di cura" agreements	Institutional: Comune, Soprintendenza Local: Property owners, volunteer associations, civil protection	Municipal level	Prevention of irreversible decay, risk reduction, controlled long-term reserve	Short–Medium (1–3 years)
E4 – Civic Spine Rebalancing	Strengthen institutional visibility and accessibility	Municipal corridor dominated by cars	Parking reduction + pedestrian enhancement + temporary car-free events	Institutional: Comune di Enna Governance: Mobility office Local: Shops, cooperatives	Municipal + Historic Centre level	Improved public realm quality, stronger civic identity, gradual shift from car dominance	Short term (1–3 years)

Table5.2 Governance/institutional Roles Matrix - Enna

*Enna relies more strongly on **public coordination** and **third-sector involvement**, with **PPP used selectively** to enable temporary use and livelihood-based actions rather than long-term private investment*

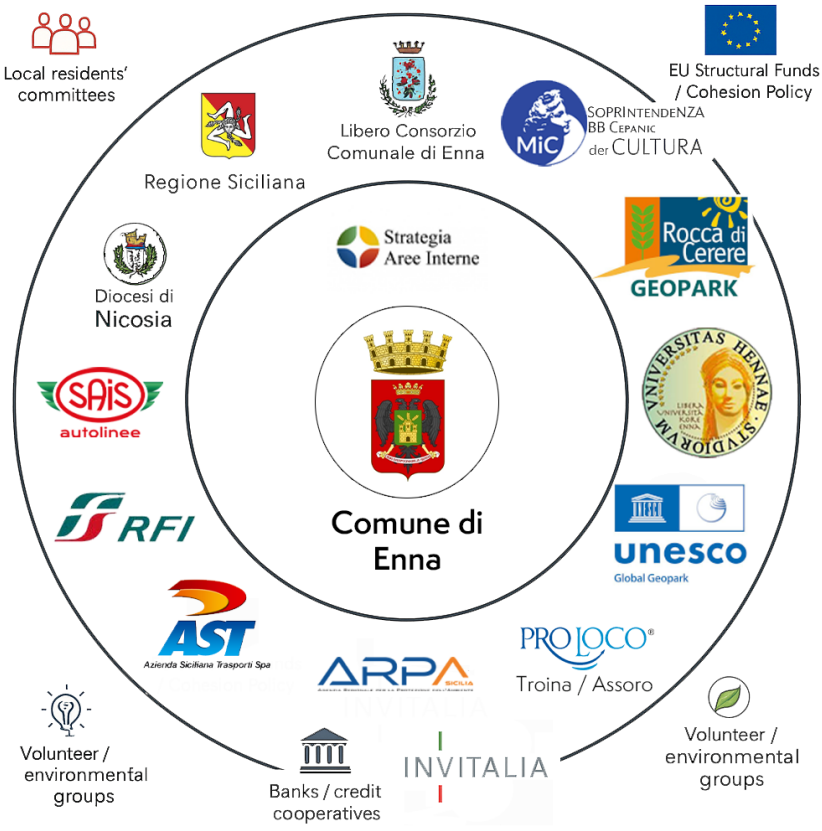


Fig 5.23 Actor-network diagram - Enna

Enna - Governance for Stabilisation and Stewardship

Governance in Enna must shift toward stabilisation, small-scale reuse, and long-term stewardship within the historic centre, rather than continuing to pursue growth-oriented regeneration. Within this reorientation, the same four lenses, recognition, selective concentration, action-based heritage management, and inter-municipal cooperation, are recalibrated around the proposed micro-hub, craft strip, civic spine, and stewardship areas.

Recognition remains framed at national and regional levels, but it must explicitly acknowledge Enna's historic centre as a shrinking condition, not solely as a heritage asset. National instruments such as PNRR and the Strategy for Inner Areas should function as enabling tools to fund micro-hubs, live-work pilots, and stewardship programmes rather than large visibility projects. The Regione Sicilia can translate this shift into policies that legitimise curated non-use, incremental adaptation, and consolidation of everyday services in the centro storico. Università Kore can support this process by monitoring the outcomes of these priority zones, demonstrating their coherence as long-term responses to demographic decline.

Selective concentration & Demolition becomes the core municipal responsibility. The Comune di Enna must prioritise a limited number of strategic sectors, the ridge micro hub, the leather and craft strip, the civic corridor, and defined stewardship blocks, rather than dispersing scarce resources across the entire fabric. This requires zoning and budgetary choices that distinguish between shrinking but inhabited streets, where modest investment can generate impact, and peripheral blocks where safety and maintenance are the only realistic objectives. The Area Interna Troina-Nebrodi can align funding with these zones, while the Libero Consorzio focuses service and mobility improvements along access routes that reinforce them.

Action-based heritage management & Reactivation makes the strategy operative. The Soprintendenza must permit incremental, reversible interventions, such as live-work conversions and civic-spine adjustments, within the framework of the Codice dei Beni Culturali. The municipality translates this into traffic calming, small-scale adaptations, rent support in the craft strip, and minimal consolidation in stewardship areas. Public-private arrangements enable temporary and livelihood-based reuse, while third-sector actors, associations, cooperatives, parish groups, take on everyday management roles within the micro-hub and stewardship zones.

Inter-municipal cooperation situates Enna within a broader territorial system. Aligning mobility, services, and technical capacity across neighbouring municipalities strengthens the identified concentration areas and makes long-term shrinkage management feasible for a small administration. In this way, cooperation consolidates Enna's role as a smaller but strategic inland centre without projecting unrealistic growth expectations.

Overall, governance in Enna is reoriented toward strong public coordination, high third-sector involvement, and cautious, targeted collaboration. Its effectiveness depends on consistently supporting a limited set of stabilisation and stewardship projects rather than dispersing efforts across the entire historic centre.

Biella

In Biella, shrinkage produces a more fragmented and uneven urban condition. Underuse is spatially differentiated, ownership structures are more complex, and the legacy of industrial decline has created opportunities for reinterpretation. Here, the strategy places **greater emphasis on activation, temporary uses, and productive reuse,** allowing actions to evolve over time. The framework operates through incremental testing, recognising uncertainty as a condition rather than a failure.

Biella's historic centre reflects a post-industrial condition in which shrinkage has produced spatial fragmentation rather than stasis. Vacancy and underuse are unevenly distributed, and the historic fabric retains latent connections to productive and cultural networks. This condition allows for selective experimentation, provided that actions remain reversible and scalable.

Spatial reading

- Fragmented parcels and mixed-use fabric
- Proximity to former industrial areas
- Uneven vacancy patterns
- Presence of cultural and associative actors

Strategic orientation

In Biella, the strategy framework prioritises activation over stabilisation. Temporary and transitional uses are employed as tools to reintroduce activity, test functions, and reorganise underused spaces. Adaptive reuse is closely linked to small-scale production, cultural initiatives, and hybrid governance structures, allowing strategies to evolve over time.

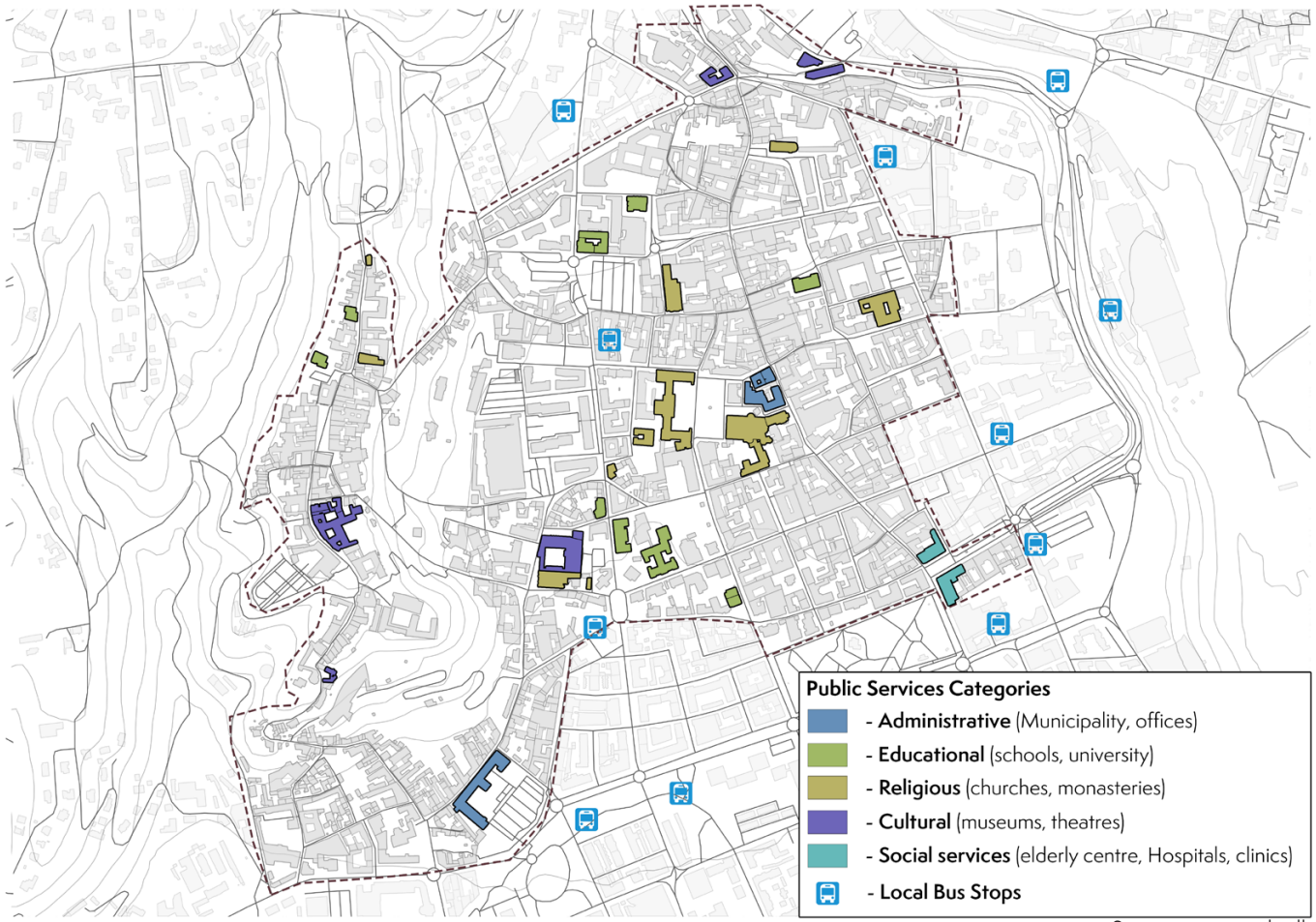


Fig 5.24 Public Services in Historic centre- Biella

Source: comune.biella.it
Author's Eloboration
Based on site visit, Biella, 2026.

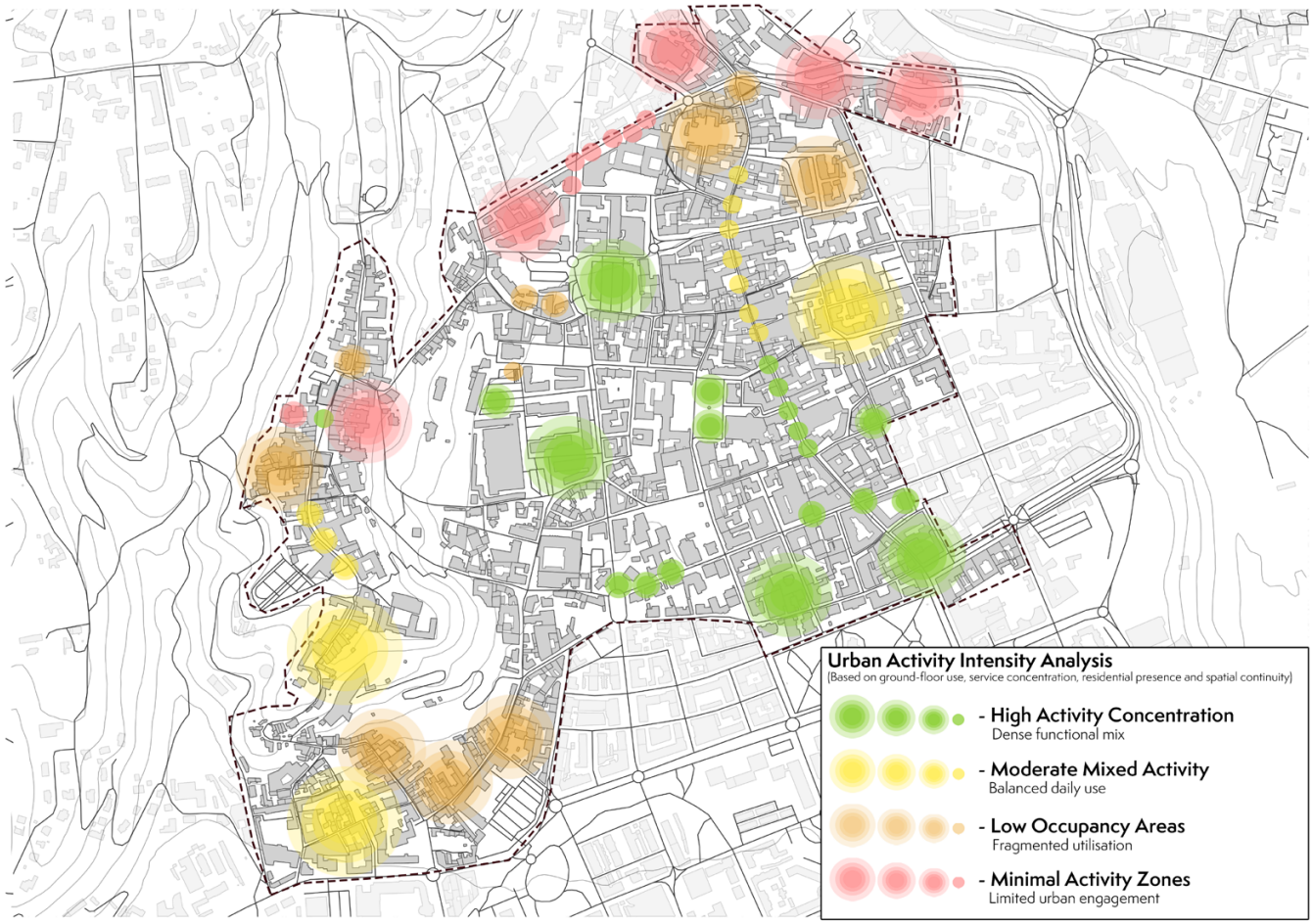


Fig 5.25 Urban Activity Intensity Analysis in Historic Centre- Biella

Source: Author's Eloboration
Based on site visit, Biella, 2026.

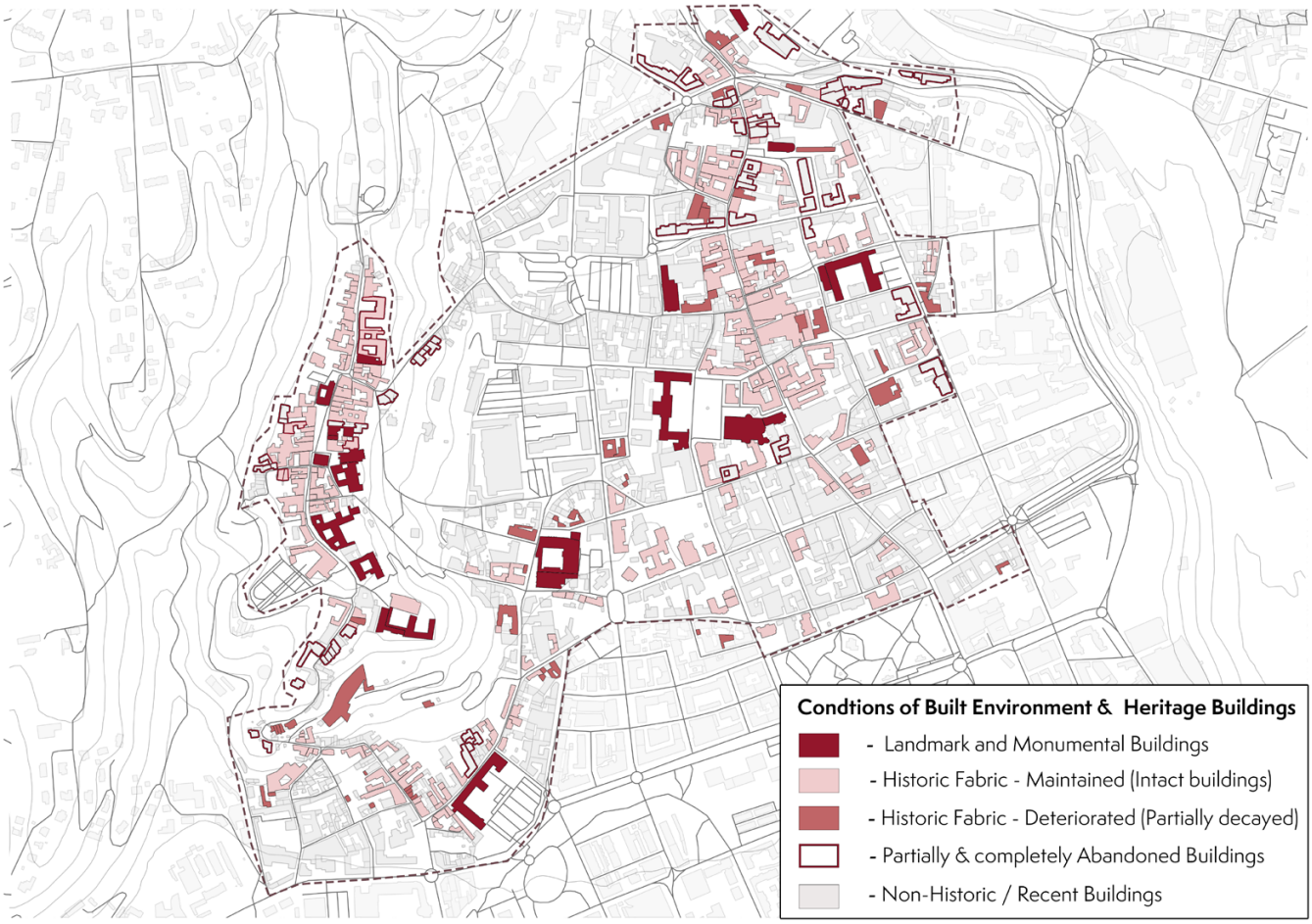


Fig 5.26 Infrastructural conditions & Heritage Buildings- Biella

Source: comune.biella.it
Author's Eloboration
Based on site visit, Biella, 2026.

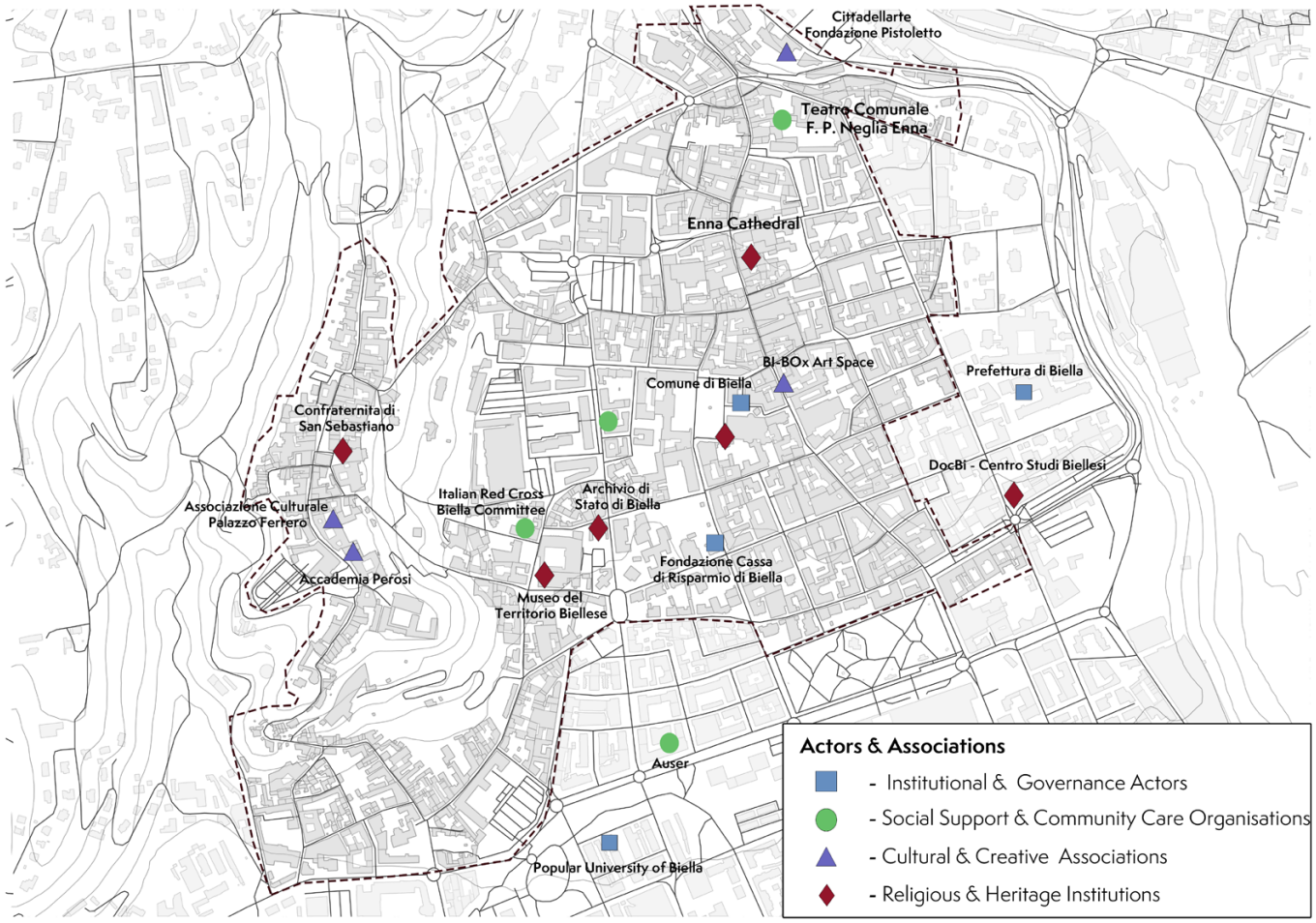


Fig 5.27 Actors and Associations Network- Biella

Source: Author's Eloboration
Based on site visit, Biella, 2026.

Governance in Biella operates through a multi-level and relational structure shaped by its industrial legacy and stronger private ownership patterns. The Municipality of Biella plays a coordinating role in identifying priority areas and enabling selective concentration, but revitalisation depends heavily on collaboration with private owners, enterprises, and third-sector actors.

Public-private relationships are particularly significant in the reuse of abandoned buildings and the activation of closed storefronts . Unlike Enna, where institutional anchoring dominates, Biella demonstrates stronger potential for productive reuse and entrepreneurial engagement. Private actors contribute investment and long-term management, while the municipality reduces risk through regulatory facilitation and temporary leasing frameworks.

Third-sector organisations and cooperatives play a complementary but essential role, especially in managing shared spaces, cultural initiatives, youth-oriented housing, and small-scale production. The presence of cultural and associative actors within the centre provides the social infrastructure necessary for incremental activation In this context, revitalisation is not driven by a single institutional anchor, but by hybrid governance structures that combine municipal coordination, private initiative, and associative management. Local actors enable temporary experimentation, allowing intervention zones to evolve over time rather than depend on immediate permanent transformation.

Actor / Association	Category	Spatial Relevance in Historic Centre	Potential Role in Interventions	Strategic Value for Shrinkage Management
Comune di Biella	Institutional	Lower historic core (Palazzo Oropa)	Defines zoning priorities; allocates public investment; coordinates regeneration	Enables selective concentration and regulatory control in shrinking areas
Prefettura di Biella	Institutional	Central administrative area	Maintains institutional continuity	Provides symbolic state presence; stabilises perception of centrality
Diocesi di Biella	Institutional / Religious	Cathedral and church properties	Manages extensive historic property assets	Key partner for adaptive reuse of underused religious buildings
Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Biella	Para-institutional	City-wide influence	Funds cultural and social projects	Financial lever for targeted, small-scale regeneration rather than growth-driven expansion
Cittadellarte - Fondazione Pistoletto	Cultural	Peripheral to core (industrial reuse site)	Cultural programming; reuse of industrial heritage	Demonstrates identity rebranding without demographic growth; model of symbolic regeneration
Associazione Culturale Palazzo Ferrero	Cultural	Piazzo (upper historic centre)	Organises exhibitions and events	Activates upper core through cultural concentration; episodic vitality
Amici del Piazzo	Cultural / Civic	Piazzo	Local initiatives and neighbourhood events	Strengthens micro-scale social cohesion in fragile fabric
BI-BOx Art Space	Cultural	Central area	Youth-oriented cultural experimentation	Attracts temporary users; supports soft urban reactivation
Accademia Perosi	Cultural / Educational	Historic centre	Music education and concerts	Ensures regular daily presence; stabilises activity beyond events
Caritas Diocesana di Biella	Social Support	Cathedral cluster	Provides assistance to vulnerable groups	Addresses social fragility linked to ageing and economic decline
Croce Rossa Italiana - Comitato di Biella	Social Support	Central area	Emergency response and volunteer services	Reinforces safety and resilience infrastructure
Auser Biella	Social Support	City-wide / accessible from centre	Supports elderly population	Directly responds to ageing demographic structure of shrinking cities
Associazione San Vincenzo De Paoli - Biella	Social Support	Parish-linked areas	Faith-based assistance network	Embedded support within historic community structures
Centro Studi Generazioni e Luoghi - Archivi Alberti La Marmora	Heritage	Piazzo	Territorial research and archival preservation	Reinforces identity-based regeneration strategies
DocBi - Centro Studi Biellesi	Heritage	Linked to industrial & historic fabric	Documents textile and architectural heritage	Supports narrative repositioning of shrinking industrial identity
Associazione Amici del Museo del Territorio Biellese	Heritage	Museum complex (San Sebastiano area)	Promotes museum activities	Maintains cultural continuity within historic core
Parrocchia Santo Stefano - Duomo di Biella	Religious	Cathedral (lower core)	Daily liturgical and community functions	Sustains symbolic and social centrality despite population loss
Basilica di San Sebastiano - Comunità religiosa	Religious	Piazzo	Religious services and heritage maintenance	Anchors upper historic centre through continuity of ritual space
Confraternita di San Sebastiano	Religious / Heritage	Piazzo	Ritual events and historical continuity	Preserves long-term civic memory in shrinking fabric

Table5.3 Actors/ Associations Matrix Matrix - Biella

Local actors in Biella sustain the historic centre not through expansion, but through selective concentration and adaptive reuse.Their role lies in ***stabilising cultural, institutional, and social continuity*** *within a context of long-term shrinkage*

Spatial Layering and Selection of Intervention Areas in the Historic Centre in Biella

The identification of intervention areas in Biella's historic centre is based on a layered spatial reading that reflects its fragmented and post-industrial condition. Shrinkage here does not appear as total abandonment, but as uneven underuse, functional mismatch, and reduced urban intensity. For this reason, the analysis focuses on how different layers of fragility and potential intersect spatially rather than treating the centre as uniformly declining.

The first layer maps public services and institutional presence, showing that **civic functions remain distributed within the historic core but no longer generate sufficient daily intensity**. A second layer examines active and inactive ground-floor uses, revealing corridors of residual commercial vitality alongside clusters of closed storefronts and intermittent occupation. Vacancy patterns are not continuous but fragmented, reinforcing a discontinuous urban structure.

A further layer analyses heritage buildings and infrastructural conditions. The historic centre contains medieval structures, religious institutions, historic palazzi, and elements of industrial heritage linked to textile production. Many of these buildings remain physically intact, yet their vulnerability is increasingly tied to underuse rather than structural decay. Buildings designed for past productive and social systems struggle to accommodate contemporary needs in a context of reduced population and shifting economic patterns. Fragmented ownership structures and regulatory constraints further complicate reuse processes.

The overlap between intact heritage assets, vacant ground floors, and underactivated public spaces highlights a critical condition, **identity remains materially present, but functional intensity has weakened.** Shrinkage in Biella is therefore expressed less through collapse and more through disconnection. Heritage risks becoming static, preserved but detached from everyday life.

When these layers are overlaid, areas of cumulative underuse emerge, particularly where fragmented parcels, former industrial proximity, and uneven vacancy coincide. At the same time, the presence of cultural actors, residual commercial activity, and structurally sound buildings indicates latent opportunity. The selected intervention zones therefore result from the spatial convergence of fragmentation and potential. Rather than pursuing comprehensive regeneration, the strategy concentrates on areas where adaptive reuse, temporary activation, and productive reinterpretation can incrementally reintroduce use and test new functions within the existing fabric.

In Biella, reliability is achieved not through permanence and stabilisation, but through flexibility, phased transformation, and the capacity to adapt actions over time.

*In Biella, strategic reliability emerges through **flexibility, incremental testing, and temporal adaptability.***

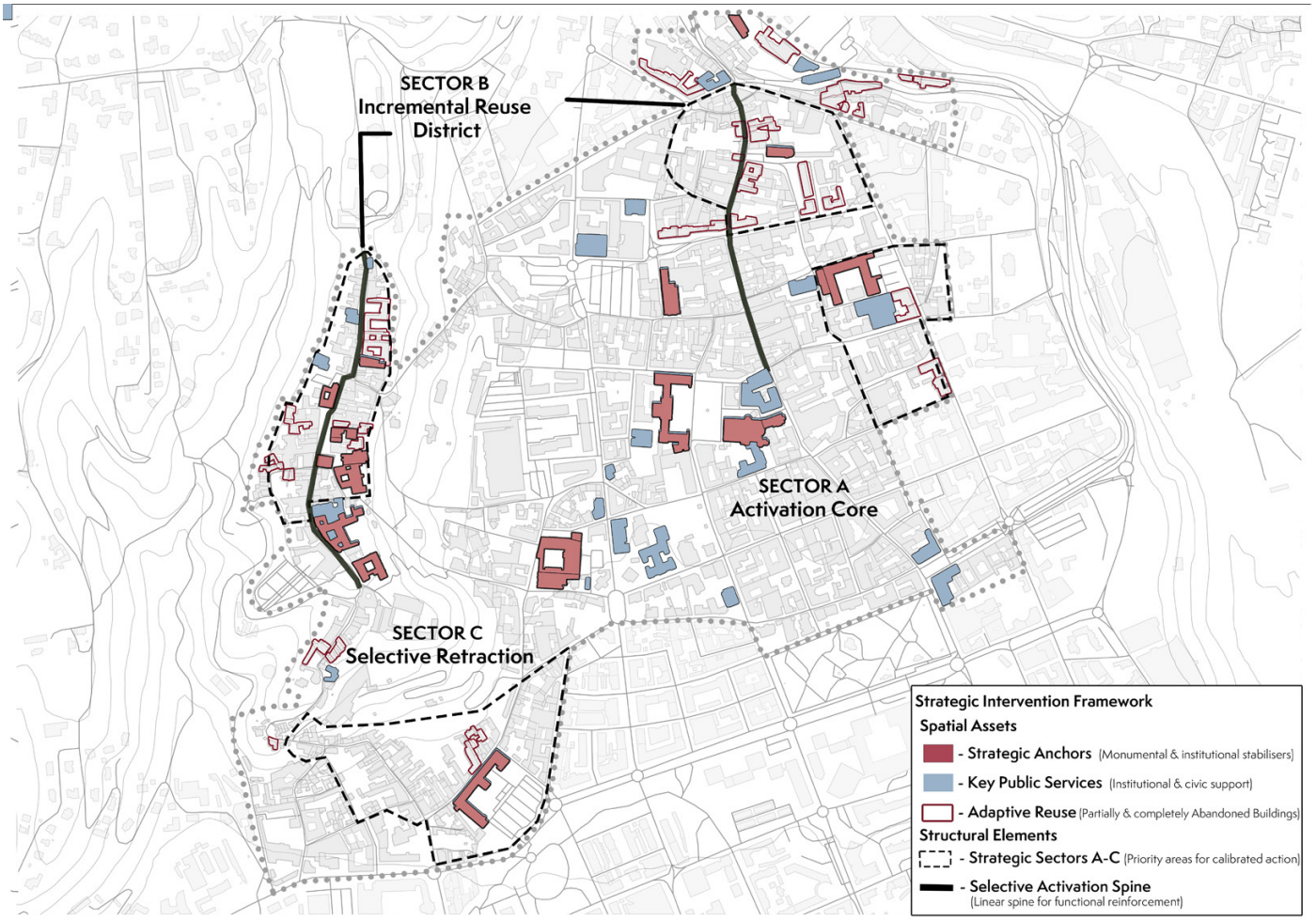


Fig 5.28 Biella - Strategy Intervention area map



SHORT TERM (0-3 yrs)

Activation & Temporary Reuse

The main square, one former mill and a few cheap shops start to host temporary uses, signalling visible reactivation of central spaces.

MEDIUM TERM (3 - 7 yrs)

Incremental Reprogramming & Productive Heritage

A modest but stable mix of cultural, productive and educational functions emerges around the square, "fabbrica lenta", botteghe and diffuse school.

LONG TERM (7 - 15 yrs)

Structural Consolidation & Managed Retraction

The historic centre operates as a reprogrammed post-industrial landscape, combining active nodes and curated non-use within an accepted shrinking condition.

In Biella, short-term experimentation enables learning and selection, while long-term outcomes emerge through ***incremental consolidation*** *and* **functional redefinition**.

Fig 5.29 Biella - Timeline

Biella : Local Actions for Activation
B1 : Programmable Civic Platform (Typology A)

This action transforms the main square into a flexible platform for recurring, small-scale activities. Through reversible installations and coordinated programming, the **space becomes a testing ground for cultural, social, and economic uses. Activation is incremental and adaptable, restoring everyday intensity without permanent restructuring.** The square operates as a core node within a selective concentration framework.

Main moves

- Installation of reversible elements (platforms, light canopies, plug-in kiosks) able to host markets, repair cafés, book fairs and public talks.
- Annual co-design of a calendar of uses with associations, schools and small businesses to keep the square active throughout the year.
- Use of the square for design-build and cultural projects with schools and universities, reinforcing educational networks.

Strategic role

Reintroduces everyday rhythms into a Typology A space that is architecturally intact but socially weak, using low-cost, reversible interventions.

Key actors

Comune di Biella, cultural foundations, schools and universities, local associations; small traders and cafés.

*Temporary **activation of the main historic square** with modular elements and recurring events to **restore everyday social and cultural rhythms**.*





Fig 5.30-5.33 Historic centre as Laboratory

Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Biella, 2026.

B2 : "Fabbrica Lenta": Incremental Industrial Reprogramming (Typology A/B)

A former textile mill is reused through phased, low-risk interventions that allow functions to evolve over time. **Temporary uses precede permanent adaptation, reducing financial exposure while testing viability**. This strategy repositions industrial heritage as a slow, productive resource rather than a single flagship project. It bridges Zone A and Zone B through adaptive, hybrid governance.

Main moves

- **Phase 1:** temporary co-working, studios and event rooms with minimal, reversible partitions and basic services under time-limited agreements.
- **Phase 2:** progressive stabilisation of selected spaces for training, small-scale production, cultural functions or incubators linked to textile and design.
- **Public-private partnership:** municipality provides enabling works and regulatory flexibility; owners/cooperatives manage use and gradual investment.

Strategic role

Bridges Typology A and B: tests functions before long-term commitments, turning industrial heritage into a slow, adaptive resource rather than a single, growth-dependent project.

Key actors

Comune di Biella, private owners or patient investors, cooperatives of young professionals, training institutions and universities

*Phased **reuse of a former textile mill** through temporary and then permanent functions to test and consolidate new productive and cultural uses.*



Fig 5.34-5.37 Reuse of Former Mills

Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Biella, 2026.

B3 : Affordable Commerce Corridor (Typology A)

This action counters commercial desertification by concentrating affordable ground floor uses along a short, strategically selected street. Reduced rents, coordinated façade maintenance, and simplified procedures enable small enterprises and cooperatives to reoccupy vacant spaces. **The focus is not on attracting external investment, but on rebuilding daily presence and informal social interaction within the historic core.**

Main moves

- Selection of a short street with many closed shops but good accessibility, based on your active/dead zone mapping.
- Negotiation of a reduced-rent scheme with owners in exchange for simplified procedures and coordinated façade maintenance.
- Priority for uses that rebuild daily presence: repair, second-hand, small food labs, youth cooperatives, shared delivery pick-up point.

Strategic role

Implements Typology A ground-floor reactivation and livelihood support, rebuilding basic functions and informal social life without large external investment.

Key actors

Comune di Biella, local property owners and their associations, foundations supporting social economy, youth cooperatives and small enterprises.

Reactivation of closed storefronts *and private spaces to support affordable commerce and youth oriented small enterprises.*



Fig 5.38 -5.41 Groundfloor Cluster

Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Biella, 2026.

B4 : Diffuse Textile & Landscape Academy (Zone A/B)

This strategy mobilises Biella's industrial and rural memory through **a distributed educational network embedded within underused spaces.** Rather than creating a new institution, it reactivates rooms across the centre and surrounding landscape as sites of skill transmission. The action links heritage, production, and education, operating across Zone A and Zone B while reinforcing territorial identity.

Main moves

- Use of a small constellation of spaces (room in a mill, room near the piazza, rural outbuilding in the valleys) as a distributed campus.
- Short courses on textile repair, sustainable design, agriculture and landscape maintenance led by retired workers, artisans and technicians.
- Integration into existing school, ITS and university pathways rather than creating a new institution.

Strategic role

Operates across Typology A and B: partially reactivates spaces while preserving knowledge and identity, linking the historic centre to industrial and rural landscapes.

Key actors

Schools, ITS and universities, ex-workers' associations, artisans and farmers, GAL and rural consortia, Comune di Biella.

Use of scattered underused rooms *as a distributed learning network to transmit industrial and rural skills across the territory.*





Fig 5.42-5.45 Areas for School of Textile and landscape

Source: Author's photograph, site visit, Biella, 2026.

Action	Intent	Spatial Focus	Type of Intervention	Key Actors	Governance Scale	Expected Outcome	Timeframe
B1 – Historic Square Laboratory	Reintroduce everyday activation through reversible programming	Main historic piazza	Modular installations + recurring event calendar	Institutional: Comune di Biella Cultural: Foundations Educational: Schools & universities Local: Traders, associations	Municipal + Historic Centre level	Increased frequency of use, social intensity, low-risk activation	Short term (1–3 years)
B2 – Fabbrica Lenta Mill Reuse	Test phased reuse of industrial heritage	Former textile building at edge of centre	Temporary occupation → phased consolidation (PPP model)	Institutional: Comune Private: Owners / investors Local: Cooperatives, professionals Educational: Training institutions	Municipal + Supralocal (economic development)	Gradual economic repositioning, reduced industrial vacancy	Medium–Long (3–7 years)
B3 – Affordable Ground-Floor Cluster	Counter commercial desertification	Street with high shop vacancy	Reduced rent agreements + regulatory simplification	Institutional: Comune Private: Property owners, Social economy: Foundations Local: Youth cooperatives	Municipal + Regolamento edilizio	Revival of everyday services, generational renewal, reduced vacancy	Medium term (3-7years)
B4 – Distributed School of Textile & Landscape	Preserve and transmit industrial knowledge	Multiple reused rooms in industrial & historic buildings	Educational programming + distributed campus model	Educational: Schools, ITS, universities Local: Former workers, artisans Rural: GAL Institutional: Comune	Supralocal + Municipal	Strengthened identity, knowledge retention, spatial reuse without heavy investment	Medium term (3-7 years)

Table5.4 Governance/institutional Roles Matrix - Biella

*Biella can support a **broad mix of Zone A and Zone B** actions, with strong **PPP potential** and a **significant role for cooperatives and third-sector actors** in managing reuse and social functions.*

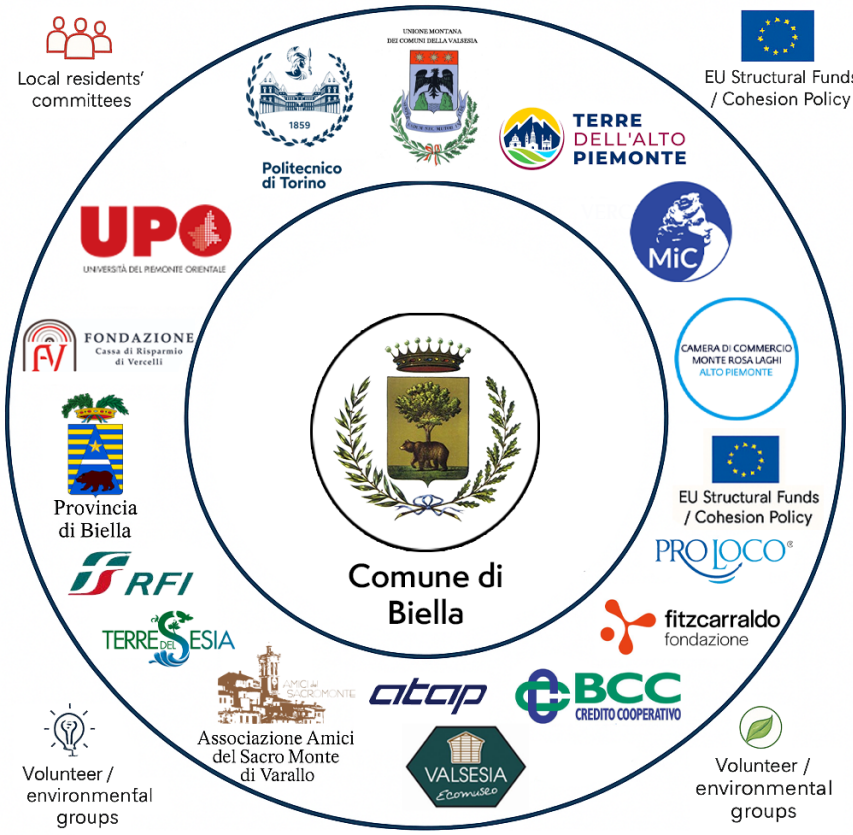


Fig 5.46 Actor-network diagram - Biella

Biella - Governance for Activation and Incremental Reprogramming

In Biella, governance must sustain activation, experimentation, and incremental reprogramming within a post-industrial historic centre where fragmented vacancy and industrial heritage coexist with strong local institutions and foundations. The same four lenses guide the strategy, but through a different balance of actors, tools, and spatial priorities.

Recognition at national and regional levels should frame Biella not only as a former industrial district, but as a shrinking medium-sized city whose historic centre is losing everyday intensity. Urban regeneration, cultural, and innovation programmes must therefore support temporary uses, phased mill reuse, and affordable ground-floor clusters rather than predominantly flagship projects. Research bodies and local academic actors can document the impacts of the "fabbrica lenta", the programmable square, the botteghe a canone dolce, and the diffuse "school", reinforcing their role as structural responses to shrinkage.

Selective concentration & Demolition requires focusing municipal effort on a limited constellation of nodes: the main square, one strategic mill complex, a short commercial street for affordable shops, and a small network of spaces for the diffuse school. The Comune di Biella must accept that not all vacant properties can be reactivated and instead use planning and financial tools to stabilise these key locations. Provincial and valley-scale coordination can align mobility, cycling routes, and digital infrastructure toward these nodes, strengthening their accessibility and territorial connections.

Action-based heritage management & Reactivation: operates through a hybrid governance model. The municipality acts as regulator and enabler, allowing temporary installations, flexible industrial reuse, and mixed functions within historic fabrics. Public-private partnerships support phased mill and ground-floor reuse, with the public sector mitigating risk through enabling works and incentives. Third-sector organisations and cooperatives manage shared spaces and activities, ensuring activation remains socially embedded. Heritage bodies support this incremental logic by privileging reversibility and continued use over rigid preservation.

Inter-municipal cooperation positions the historic centre within a wider textile and valley system. Coordinated mobility, landscape, and branding initiatives reinforce central nodes rather than bypassing them, while shared technical structures help smaller municipalities connect to Biella's cultural and educational programmes.

Overall, governance in Biella moves toward balanced co-production: public actors concentrate resources, private actors assume medium-term risk, and third-sector actors sustain everyday activation. Addressing shrinkage depends on maintaining this coalition around a limited number of programmable nodes while accepting curated non-use as part of the urban condition.

5.3 From Place-Based Actions to Transferable Strategies

The actions proposed for Enna and Biella are intentionally rooted in their specific spatial and demographic conditions. They respond to concrete situations: fragmented vacancy in historic centres, ageing populations, underused public buildings, weakened local economies, and strong but often isolated local actors. However, while the spatial form of each intervention is context-specific, the logic behind them is not limited to these two cities.

Many shrinking mid-size towns in Italy, especially within the aree interne, share similar structural conditions. Demographic contraction is long-term, not temporary. Vacancy is dispersed rather than concentrated in single large sites. Economic activity is fragile and often dependent on small local networks. Municipal resources are limited, and governance capacity is uneven. Within this context, the objective cannot be comprehensive regeneration based on growth assumptions. Instead, it becomes a question of management, stabilization, and selective activation.

For this reason, the proposals for Enna and Biella can be reframed as a set of transferable strategic principles.

First, both cases prioritize **reuse before expansion.** Shrinking towns already contain a surplus of built fabric. The actions therefore focuses on activating vacant buildings, adapting existing structures, and introducing hybrid programs within the historic centre rather than promoting new construction. This principle can be applied in any shrinking mid-size town by mapping vacancy, identifying strategic buildings, and enabling flexible reuse mechanisms.

Second, the interventions operate through selective concentration. Limited financial and administrative capacity requires **focusing on specific nodes rather than distributing resources evenly**. In both cities, strategic areas are identified where public space, services, and economic activities can reinforce each other. This approach accepts spatial unevenness and uses it as a tool to stabilize priority zones while allowing other areas to transition more slowly.

Third, the actions reinforce everyday **social infrastructure instead of relying on large flagship projects.** Intergenerational spaces, small-scale productive hubs, and civic programs are introduced to maintain daily presence within the historic core. In shrinking towns, social continuity becomes more important than visibility or image-based regeneration.

Fourth, the proposals support **localized economic ecosystems.** Rather than attracting external large-scale investment, the strategy strengthens existing skills, local production, small enterprises, and cooperative models. This re-localization of economic flows increases resilience in contexts where growth is uncertain.

Fifth, the **implementation logic is incremental and adaptive.** The projects are conceived as phased, scalable, and adjustable over time. This allows municipalities to test programs, adapt to demographic evolution, and align ambition with available resources.

Sixth, the framework relies on governance and monitoring as structural infrastructure. Selective concentration is not self-executing, it requires institutional coordination, regulatory flexibility, and continuous evaluation over time. Governance translates strategic priorities

into zoning adjustments, funding allocation, temporary permits, and cooperative management agreements, ensuring that spatial concentration becomes operational rather than symbolic. **Monitoring allows the strategy to remain adaptive,** tracking demographic change, vacancy patterns, and use intensity so that Typology A and B areas can be recalibrated when necessary. Rather than fixing concentration zones permanently, this pillar sustains selective concentration as a long-term process of territorial stewardship, aligning interventions with a reduced but persistent urban demand.

Through this abstraction, the Enna and Biella proposals move beyond their specific contexts and become part of a broader operational for framework for shrinking mid-size towns. The intention is not to replicate identical projects, but to apply consistent strategic logics that can be recalibrated according to local morphology, governance structure, and demographic trajectory. In this way, shrinkage is not treated as a deviation to be reversed, but as a structural condition to be managed. The goal is to balance contraction with continuity, preserving the identity and functionality of historic centres while adapting them to reduced but stable demographic realities.

The place-based actions developed for Enna and Biella can be abstracted into a broader operational framework applicable to shrinking mid-size towns. Rather than replicating specific projects, the following flow diagram translates these interventions into a structured sequence that moves from the recognition of shrinkage within historic centres to the identification of concentration zones, differentiated action logics, governance roles, and incremental funding mechanisms. It synthesizes the strategic hierarchy underpinning the proposals and presents it as a transferable model for managing shrinkage through selective, adaptive, and context-sensitive intervention.

Observed Condition (Enna/Biella)	Place-Based Action	Underlying Principle	General Strategy for Shrinking Towns	How to Adapt Locally
High vacancy in historic core	Reuse vacant buildings for hybrid public programs	Activate idle assets	Systematic reuse of vacant stock before new construction	Map vacancy; classify by ownership; introduce temporary use policies
Aging population	Introduce intergenerational public spaces	Social infrastructure reinforcement	Prioritize services and spaces that mix age groups	Co-locate elderly services with schools, cultural spaces, health hubs
Weak local economy	Support local production networks	Relocalize economic flows	Strengthen small-scale productive ecosystems	Identify existing skills; create cooperative platforms
Urban fragmentation	Create connective public corridors	Spatial stitching	Improve walkability and micro-mobility connections	Focus on short-distance daily routes (home–services–work)
Underused institutional buildings	Convert into multi-functional civic hubs	Programmatic hybridization	Consolidate public services into shared infrastructures	Audit municipal properties; encourage shared management
Population decline in periphery	Strategic densification of core	Smart contraction	Concentrate investment in strategic areas	Define priority zones instead of uniform distribution
Identity loss	Reactivate cultural landscapes	Narrative reinforcement	Use local heritage as development infrastructure	Translate local history into spatial and economic assets

Table5.5 Generalization Matrix
From Enna & Biella → To Any Shrinking Mid-Size Town

Networked Selective Concentration

The strategy proposed in this thesis does not follow a traditional decentralisation model. **Rather than dispersing functions away from a single core, it introduces a system of networked selective concentration** within the historic centre and its fringe.

Instead of reinforcing one dominant node, multiple strategic nodes are identified based on existing social activity, institutional anchors, accessibility, and heritage capacity. Investment, infill, and adaptive reuse are directed toward these selected clusters to maintain critical mass and stabilise everyday life. These nodes operate as interconnected points of intensity, supporting each other rather than competing.

Areas outside these priority nodes are not uniformly developed or abandoned. They are managed through phased containment, testing, and gradual reconnection where possible. This creates a poly-nodal structure that balances concentration with diffusion, allowing shrinking towns to maintain spatial coherence while adapting to demographic decline.



Fig 5.47 Selective concentration of place-based actions

Rather than dispersing actions uniformly, the strategy concentrates interventions selectively within limited portions of the historic fabric. These concentration zones act as spatial anchors, where multiple actions overlap and reinforce each other, while surrounding areas remain managed through lighter or delayed forms of intervention.

Derivation of Typology A and B Areas from the Methodology and Case Studies

The distinction between Typology A and B is not introduced as a theoretical classification but emerges directly from the methodological process and the place-based actions developed for Enna and Biella. Through layered mapping of demographic trends, vacancy patterns, service presence, heritage conditions, and institutional anchors, the analysis revealed differentiated spatial conditions within the historic centres. These variations required different operational responses, which were first tested through the micro-interventions in both case studies.

In Enna, the neighbourhood micro-hub along the Castello-Duomo ridge, the live-work craft strip, and the rebalancing of the municipal corridor were all situated in areas where social life persists but remains fragile. These interventions correspond to what is now defined as Typology A, inhabited but shrinking areas where stabilisation and reinforcement can realistically maintain continuity. The actions did not seek transformation, but consolidation of everyday presence through adaptive reuse, modest public-space recalibration, and livelihood support.

At the same time, Enna's identified stewardship blocks, characterised by long-term vacancy and limited social presence, required a different approach. Here, temporary use, minimal consolidation, and curated non-use were proposed instead of forced reactivation. These areas informed the formulation of Typology B, where containment and care replace immediate redevelopment.

A similar differentiation emerges in Biella. The ground-floor cluster, programmable square, and partial mill reuse are positioned within sectors where latent activity and institutional presence allow incremental activation. These reflect the logic of Typology A, where selective concentration strengthens nodes capable of sustaining everyday intensity. Conversely, areas of deeper vacancy and underused industrial fabric are approached through phased testing, reversible uses, and hybrid governance arrangements, aligning with the principles of Typology B.

In both cities, **the differentiation between stabilisation and stewardship was not imposed a priority.** It emerged from the spatial reading and from the practical calibration of interventions according to degree of occupation, social continuity, and realistic investment capacity. The abstraction into Typology A and B therefore represents a methodological generalisation of tested spatial conditions rather than a conceptual imposition.

Through this derivation, selective concentration becomes operational. It is not merely a spatial prioritisation tool, but a structured response aligned with observable shrinkage conditions. The two-zone framework translates the empirical lessons of Enna and Biella into a transferable logic applicable to other shrinking mid-size towns, while remaining adaptable to local morphology, governance structure, and demographic trajectory.

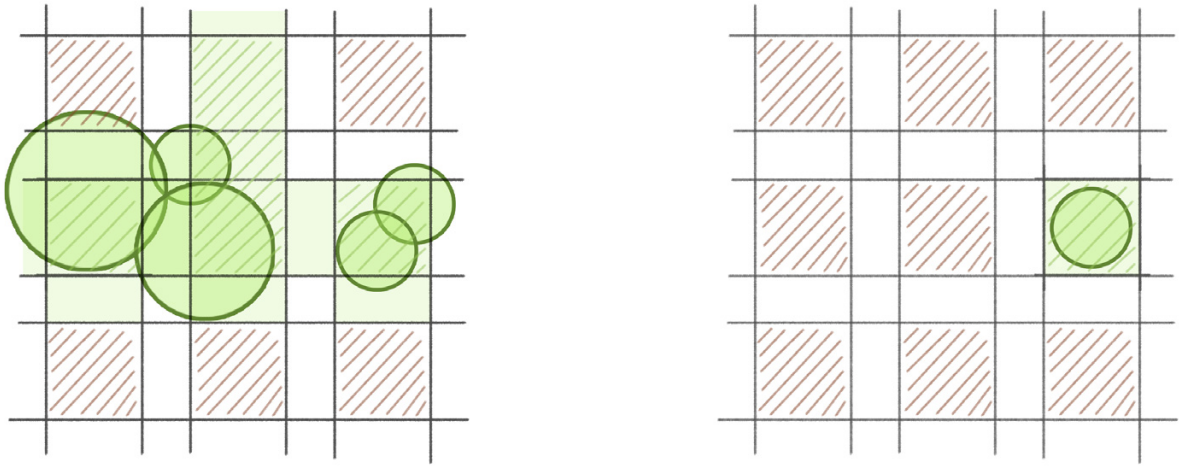
Typology A - Inhabited but Shrinking Areas
(fragile continuity, active social life)

Action Category	Key Actions (Within Concentration Zones)	Actors Involved	Public–Private Relationship (PPR)	Timeframe
Everyday function reinforcement	Targeted ground-floor activation; essential local services; micro-retail in priority streets	Municipality; private owners; local entrepreneurs	Public enables access and basic adaptation; private actors manage daily use	Short-term activation; continuous consolidation
Productive heritage reuse	Live–work units; artisan workshops; repair labs; small-scale production within reused heritage buildings	Small enterprises; cooperatives; property owners	Public de-risks initial adaptation; private actors sustain productive continuity	Short–medium term
Upper-floor residential reactivation	Upper-floor rehousing; subdivision into small units; assisted or shared living models	Municipality; social housing bodies; owners	Public support for adaptive reuse; private ownership retained	Medium term
Public space reinforcement	Targeted micro-interventions in strategic nodes; markets; seating; lighting; civic programming	Municipality; local associations	Public investment focused in concentration areas; civic actors activate space	Short term, incremental
Heritage maintenance through active use	Routine maintenance tied to occupancy; incremental upgrading of inhabited buildings	Owners; municipality; heritage professionals	Shared responsibility; use as preservation mechanism	Continuous
Local livelihood strengthening	Support for micro-enterprises; short supply chains; cooperative networks anchored in historic centre	Third sector; private actors; municipality	Public facilitation and incentives; private initiative drives continuity	Continuous

Table 5.6 Typology A actions for Stabilisation & Reinforcement

Action Logics for Inhabited Shrinking Areas

In inhabited but shrinking areas, the primary objective is to stabilise existing social life and prevent further shrinkage into abandonment. Actions focus on reinforcing everyday functions through the reactivation of vacant ground floors, the introduction of live-work typologies, and the targeted adaptation of upper-floor housing. Small-scale public-space interventions support daily use rather than symbolic representation, while heritage management prioritises maintenance and use-based conservation.



Layered Activation in inhabited zones

Single action nodes in fabric

Fig 5.48 Action Logics for Inhabited Shrinking Areas

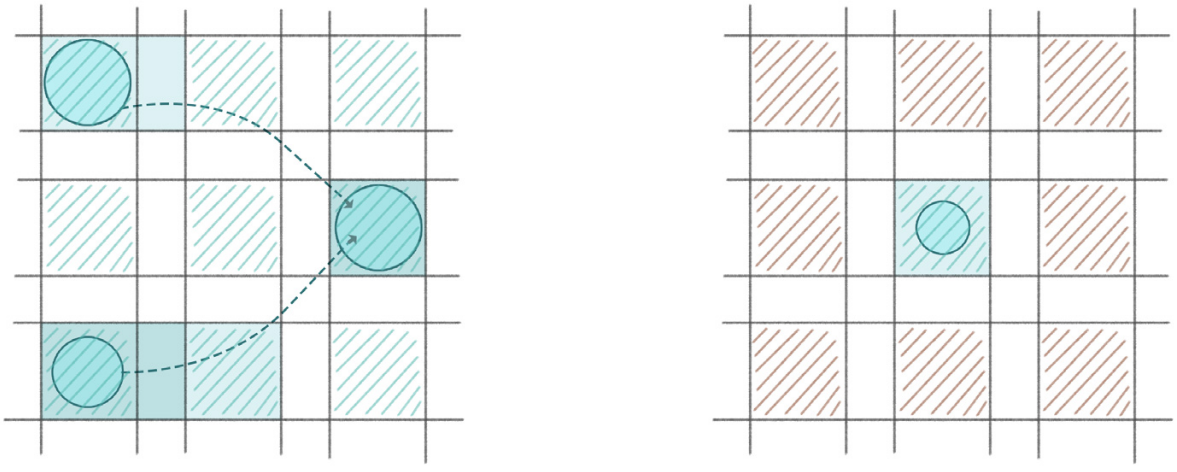
Typology B - Areas of Advanced Abandonment
(ruptured continuity, long-term vacancy)

Action Category	Key Actions	Actors Involved	Public–Private Relationship (PPR)	Timeframe
Temporary use & leasing	Pop-up, seasonal, or rotational uses	Municipality; owners; cultural & social actors	Public mediation; private or civic activation	Short–medium term, episodic
Use-before-investment	Minimal works; testing uses	Municipality; owners; technical advisors	Public de-risks testing; private actors experiment	Medium term
Minimal consolidation & safety	Structural stabilisation; selective closure	Municipality; owners; heritage professionals	Public co-funding; private compliance	Medium–long term
Stewardship agreements	Community or cooperative care	Associations; cooperatives; owners	Formal care agreements without ownership transfer	Long term
Selective non-intervention	Managed non-use; monitoring	Municipality; heritage authority	Public recognition of non-use as strategy	Long term
Gradual reconnection strategies	Linking to active zones; phased reintegration	Municipality; inter-municipal bodies	Public coordination; long-term vision	Long term

Table 5.7 Typology B actions of Containment & Testing

Action Logics for Areas of advaced adandonment

In areas of advanced abandonment, a different logic applies. Rather than seeking immediate reactivation, actions aim to manage vacancy and test future possibilities through temporary and reversible uses. These include temporary leasing, seasonal or rotational activities, minimal safety and consolidation works, and stewardship agreements that ensure care without permanent occupation. In this context, selective non-intervention is recognised as a legitimate strategy, avoiding over-investment while preserving future options.

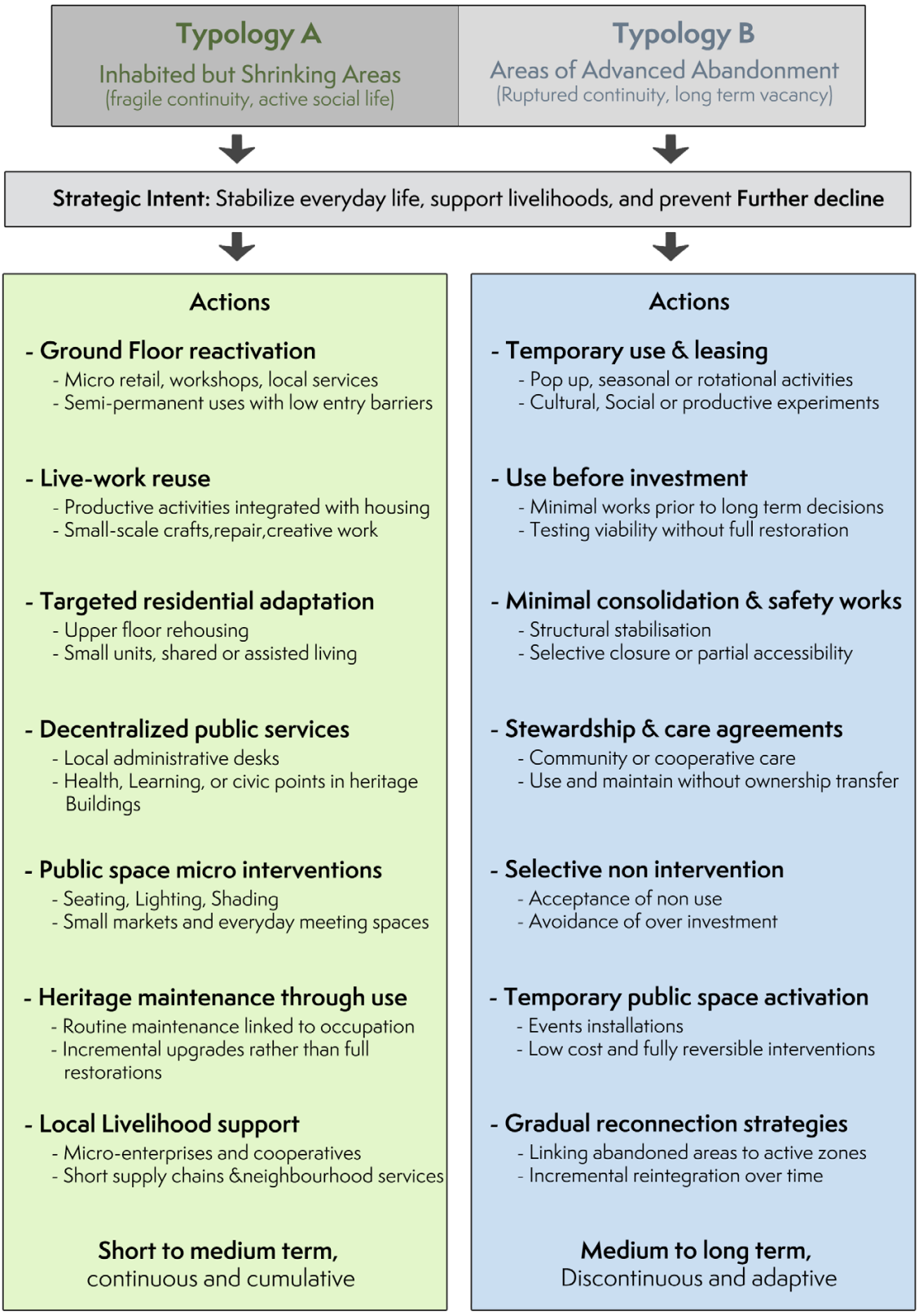


Temporary use by leasing

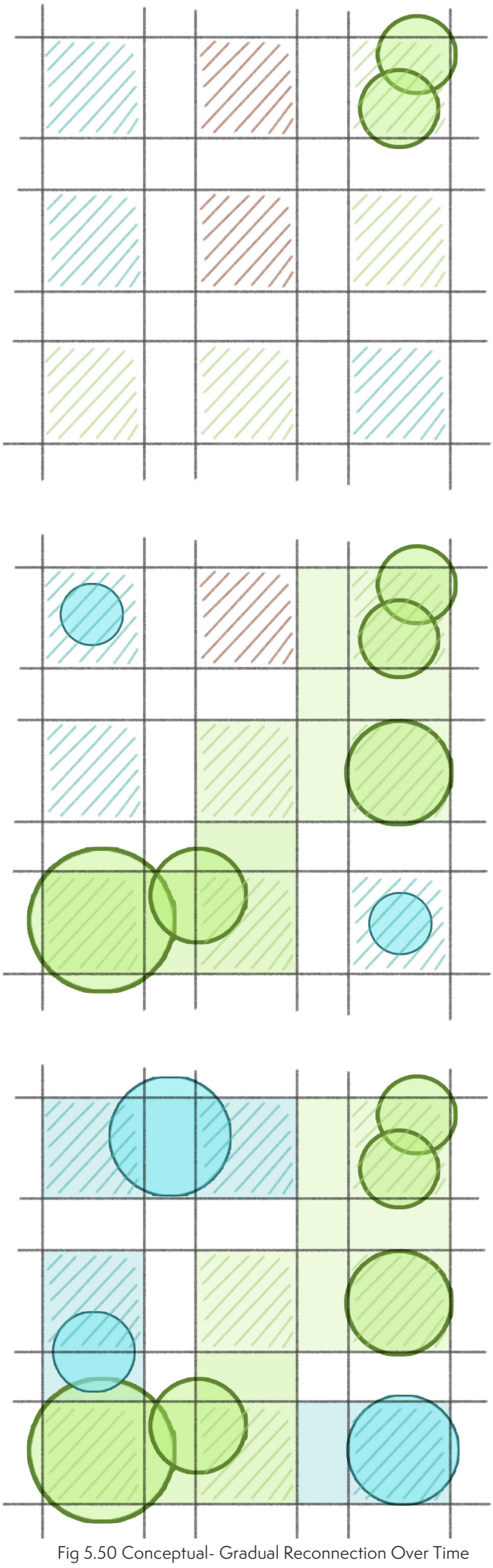
Stewardship and Non use

Fig 5.49 Action Logics for Areas of advanced abandonment

Action Framework for Shrinking Historic Centres



Action framework for Zone A & B



Phase 1 - Initial node activation

Reconnection begins with the activation of a limited number of nodes within selected areas of the historic centre.

Short Term (0 -3 Yrs)

Phase 2 - Incremental linking of actions

Additional actions gradually extend from initial nodes, creating partial connections between previously disconnected areas.

Medium Term (3 -7 Yrs)

Phase 3 - Gradual spatial reconnection

Over time, accumulated actions allow larger portions of the historic centre to function as an interconnected network adapted to shrinkage.

Long Term (7 -15 Yrs)

Fig 5.50 Conceptual- Gradual Reconnection Over Time

Risks and Misapplications of Selective Concentration

While selective concentration offers a realistic response to demographic contraction, its application carries potential risks if not carefully calibrated. **Over-concentration may intensify contrasts between prioritised and non prioritised areas, leading to perceptions of abandonment rather than managed transition**. Targeted reinvestment within selected nodes may also produce unintended social displacement if affordability and public oversight are weak.

In Typology B areas, curated non-use risks being misread as passive neglect unless supported by active maintenance and stewardship. Institutional fragmentation can further undermine the strategy, reducing coordinated action to isolated pilot projects. Finally, without continuous monitoring, selective concentration may become rigid zoning rather than adaptive recalibration. For this reason, the strategy must remain transparent, socially attentive, and institutionally coordinated, functioning as an ongoing governance process rather than a fixed spatial model.

Governance through Public-Private Partnership and Inter-Municipal Cooperation

The implementation of the proposed actions relies on structured Public-Private Partnership (PPPs) rather than traditional development-led partnerships. In shrinking historic centres, PPPs operate as mechanisms for shared responsibility and risk reduction, enabling action in contexts where market-driven investment is unlikely.

Public actors assume a facilitating and coordinating role, providing regulatory support, limited funding for enabling works, and technical assistance. Private owners, retain ownership while engaging in temporary or incremental uses, while local associations or cooperatives often take on management and stewardship roles. Inter-municipal cooperation further reinforces this structure by pooling technical expertise and administrative capacity, particularly where individual municipalities face institutional and financial constraints.

Unione di Comuni and Inter-Municipal Cooperation

Within the governance structure of shrinking mid-size towns, the Unione di Comuni represents a critical intermediate scale between the municipality and the supralocal institutional framework. In contexts where individual municipalities face limited administrative capacity and shrinking financial resources, **inter-municipal cooperation enables the pooling of technical expertise, shared planning offices, and coordinated access to regional and European funding instruments.** Rather than duplicating fragmented local efforts, the Unione di Comuni can align mobility systems, service provision, digital infrastructure, and territorial branding strategies with the selective concentration model adopted within individual historic centres.

In the proposed framework, inter-municipal cooperation reinforces the Governance and Monitoring pillar by stabilising institutional continuity beyond short political cycles. It supports data collection, comparative evaluation, and coordinated funding applications, ensuring that selective concentration operates not as an isolated municipal initiative but as part of a wider territorial system. This scale is particularly relevant in Italia di Mezzo, where medium-sized towns function as hinges between inner areas and metropolitan

regions. Through the Unione di Comuni, selective concentration can therefore be territorially embedded, strengthening both the resilience of individual historic centres and the coherence of the surrounding settlement network.

Funding as an Enabling Tool for Selective Action

Within this framework, funding is conceived as an enabling tool rather than a driver of transformation. Instead of large, one-off regeneration projects, the strategy prioritises incremental and hybrid funding models that support continuity and adaptability. Public resources are primarily used to cover enabling costs, while private and third-sector actors contribute through management, labour, and in-kind resources. This approach aligns funding with the logic of decentralisation and livelihood support, lowering entry barriers for small-scale initiatives while reinforcing long-term heritage management.

Actor	Level of Involvement	Main Strategic Role	Contribution / Tools	Pillar Alignment	Spatial Focus (Zone A / B)	Expected Return
Municipality	Municipal (strategic) + Regulatory (PRG / Regolamento Edilizio)	Spatial prioritisation, coordination of selective concentration, zoning differentiation	Enabling works (access, safety), flexible permits, small grants, rent moderation tools, monitoring systems	Selective Concentration; Adaptive Heritage Management; Governance & Monitoring	Zone A stabilisation; Zone B stewardship definition	Avoided unmanaged decline, efficient resource allocation, political legitimacy
Inter-Municipal Cooperation / Area Interna / Province	Supralocal	Capacity pooling, scaling strategy beyond single municipality	Shared technical offices, joint EU/regional funding bids, mobility & infrastructure coordination	Recognition; Governance & Monitoring	Reinforces nodes through territorial connectivity	Institutional efficiency, access to larger funding streams
Regional / National / EU Bodies	Supralocal (policy & funding level)	Strategic framing of shrinkage, experimental support	Pilot funding, targeted calls (heritage, shrinkage, social innovation), co-financing instruments	Recognition; Governance & Monitoring	Supports pilot nodes; de-risks experimentation	Demonstrator projects, knowledge production, policy refinement
Private Property Owners	Historic Centre (property scale) + Regulatory compliance	Asset stewardship under shrinkage	Rent moderation, maintenance, acceptance of temporary/experimental uses	Adaptive Heritage Management	Zone A adaptive reuse; Zone B controlled non-use	Risk reduction, value stabilisation, future optionality
Local Enterprises / Artisans	Historic Centre (node scale)	Productive activation of underused heritage spaces	Micro-investment, daily operation, ground-floor occupation	Local Economic Reinforcement; Everyday Social Infrastructure	Primarily Zone A nodes	Stable modest income, lower entry barriers, reputational value
Cooperatives / Third Sector	Historic Centre + Municipal partnership	Management, care, and social continuity	Hybrid funding (grants + member fees), volunteer labour, space management	Everyday Social Infrastructure; Governance & Monitoring	Zone A daily activation; Zone B stewardship presence	Organisational stability, employment/stipends, social recognition
Knowledge Institutions (Universities)	Supralocal + Municipal collaboration	Monitoring, evaluation, research support	Data collection, impact studies, spatial analysis, scenario modelling	Governance & Monitoring	Cross-zone (evaluation across centre)	Knowledge production, research visibility, policy influence

Table 5.8 Inter Municipal Cooperation / Funding as an Enabling Tool

5.4 Strategic Methodology Overview
Operational Framework for Shrinking Mid-Size Towns

The proposed strategy operates as an integrated methodology that moves from recognition of shrinkage to selective spatial targeting, differentiated action logics, and multi-scalar governance coordination. It does not seek to reverse decline but to stabilise, manage, and recalibrate historic centres under long-term contraction.

From Recognition to Adaptive Stewardship

The strategy developed in this thesis does not emerge as a fixed model applied uniformly across contexts. It is derived through a gradual translation of **territorial diagnosis into spatial prioritisation and governance alignment**. Rather than beginning with intervention, the process begins with understanding the structural conditions shaping each historic centre.

The methodology operates across interconnected scales. At the territorial level, long-term demographic trends and spatial clustering patterns are analysed to determine whether shrinkage is episodic or structural. This step situates each case within its broader regional system and clarifies the administrative and infrastructural constraints that influence local action.

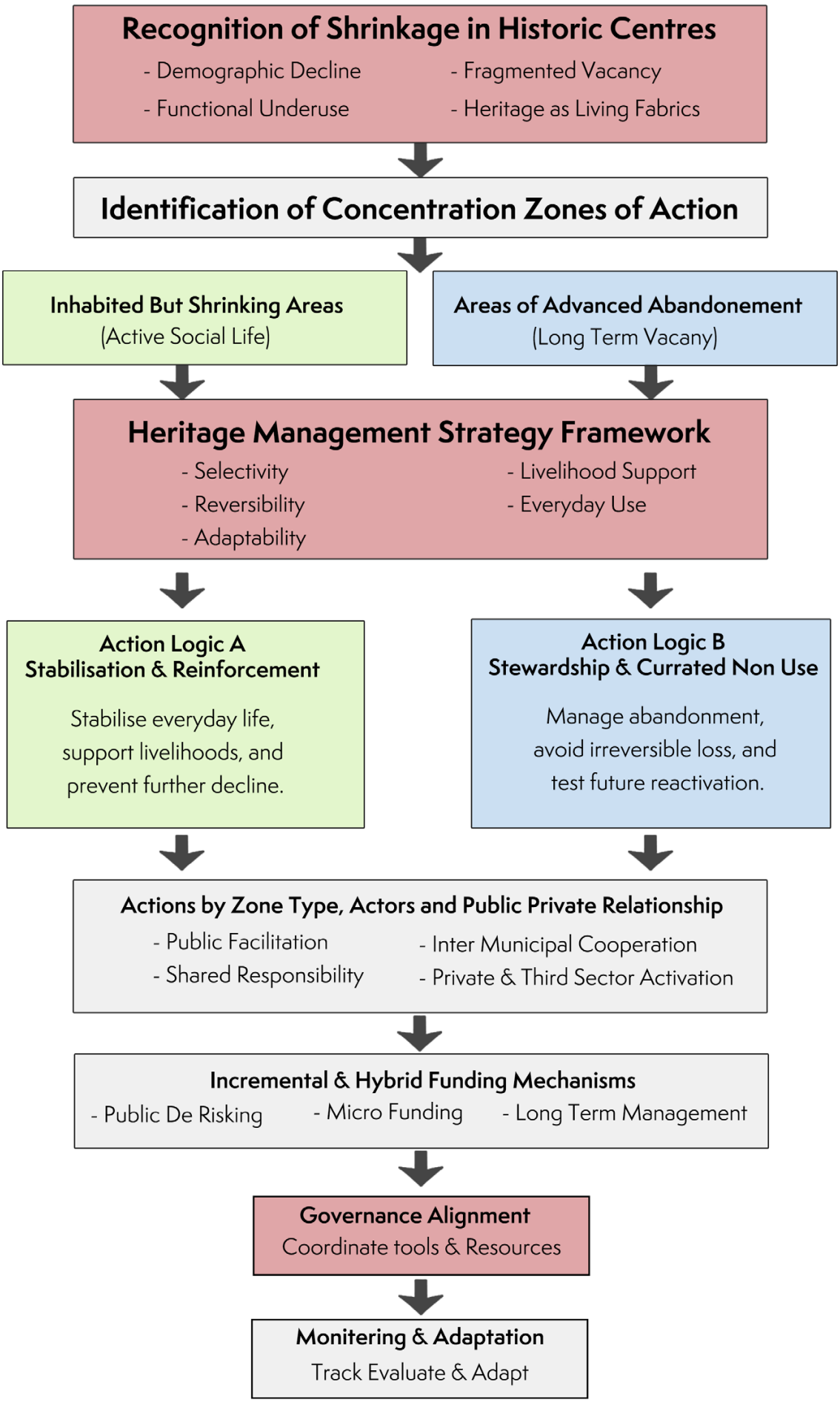
At the urban level, the historic centre is read as a differentiated environment. Variations in activity, service presence, accessibility, and institutional anchoring are examined to identify internal contrasts. This avoids treating decline as uniform and instead reveals gradients of stability and fragility within the same fabric.

At the micro-spatial level, layered mapping becomes central to the decision-making process. Vacancy distribution, building condition, ground-floor use, accessibility constraints, and actor presence are overlaid to identify areas where multiple forms of vulnerability converge, as well as zones where latent capacity remains. Intervention areas are therefore selected based on cumulative spatial evidence rather than isolated indicators.

Following diagnosis, the methodology shifts toward prioritisation. Instead of **proposing comprehensive transformation, it establishes criteria for where action is viable, feasible, and institutionally supportable.** Spatial proposals are evaluated in relation to regulatory constraints, heritage protection frameworks, administrative capacity, and funding accessibility. This ensures that strategy remains grounded in implementation realities.

An important aspect of the methodology is its adaptive character. The framework is not conceived as a definitive masterplan, but as a process capable of adjustment over time. Periodic reassessment of vacancy patterns, service provision, and institutional capacity allows the strategy to respond to evolving demographic and economic conditions.

In this sense, the methodology functions less as a prescriptive blueprint and more as a structured decision-making sequence. It connects analysis, prioritisation, and governance feasibility into a coherent process through which shrinking historic centres can be managed with calibration rather than overextension.



Strategic flow of the mechanism

Strategic Positioning and Governance Continuity

The proposed framework does not assume that every vacant building must be reactivated, nor that every sector of the historic centre requires transformation. In contexts of structural shrinkage, selective intervention becomes more appropriate than comprehensive regeneration. Certain areas, particularly those marked by advanced vacancy, topographic constraint, or limited accessibility, are approached through curated non-use. In these sectors, emptiness is not treated as failure, but as a managed condition. Minimal consolidation, safety measures, and periodic maintenance replace forced activation.

This approach recognises that demographic contraction permanently alters demand. Attempting to reinvest in all structures would disperse limited resources and reproduce growth based assumptions that no longer correspond to local realities. Instead, **the strategy concentrates effort where functional continuity is still viable, while stabilising fragile areas without overextending intervention capacity.** Emptiness, when governed, becomes a form of spatial reserve that preserves the historic fabric without imposing unrealistic expectations of revival.

At the same time, historic centres cannot operate in isolation from their wider territorial systems. Intermunicipal cooperation plays a structural role in sustaining long-term viability. Through collaborative frameworks such as Unione dei Comuni and Area Interna programmes, **municipalities can share services, coordinate funding, and align institutional priorities.** This scalar coordination allows smaller cities to remain functionally relevant within broader networks, shifting from isolated competition toward cooperative resilience.

The strategy therefore operates across three interconnected levels:

- micro-scale spatial actions
- local actor mobilisation
- intermunicipal governance coordination.

Small-scale interventions, neighbourhood hubs, live-work strips, adaptive reuse of heritage structures, and curated stewardship zones, are not conceived as isolated projects. Together, they form a distributed system of incremental stabilisation. Each action reinforces everyday presence, strengthens local associations, and reconnects institutional anchors to underused spaces. Over time, this selective concentration reshapes the historic centre through recalibrated intensity rather than expansion.

Financial sustainability is equally central to the viability of this framework. In shrinking territories, funding cannot rely on large, one-time regeneration programmes, but must be assembled through layered and cooperative mechanisms. Intermunicipal structures allow municipalities to access regional, national, and European funding streams that would be difficult to secure individually. By pooling administrative capacity and aligning strategic priorities, smaller cities can strengthen their eligibility for programmes related to inner areas, heritage adaptation, social innovation, and sustainable mobility.

At the same time, local actors play a decisive role in activating and maintaining funded initiatives. Associations, cooperatives, parishes, cultural organisations, and small enterprises

become operational partners in translating public investment into everyday use. Rather than positioning funding solely as capital expenditure for physical transformation, the strategy frames it as support for management, programming, andmaintenance. Micro grants, cooperative agreements, and public civic partnerships ensure that interventions remain embedded in the local social fabric.

In this sense, funding is not conceived as an external injection of growth, but as a stabilising instrument that reinforces governance structures and actor networks. Financial coordination across municipalities, combined with local stewardship, allows small scale interventions to accumulate impact over time without exceeding territorial capacity.

However, the long-term success of these interventions depends on governance continuity and maintenance. Shrinking territories require ongoing monitoring, adaptive regulation, and structured stewardship mechanisms. Periodic evaluation of vacancy patterns, service provision, and actor engagement becomes essential to ensure that interventions remain relevant. Maintenance agreements, cooperative management models, and institutional oversight transform strategy from a fixed plan into an evolving process.

In this sense, the framework does not seek to reverse shrinkage, but to manage it responsibly through coordination, continuity, and institutional care. The following conclusion reflects on how this approach contributes to a broader understanding of sustaining historic centres under conditions of demographic decline.



Conclusion

Main Findings of the Study What the Research Has Shown

This research demonstrates that historic centres in medium-sized Italian towns are affected by a structural condition of long-term shrinkage that cannot be adequately addressed through growth-oriented planning models. In contexts such as Enna and Biella, contraction is not episodic but persistent, shaped by demographic decline, ageing populations, economic restructuring, and institutional fragility.

Shrinkage in these territories does not produce widespread physical abandonment. Instead, it manifests as selective underuse, thinning commercial activity, service withdrawal, and the gradual erosion of everyday life within largely intact historic fabrics. The core planning challenge therefore lies in managing the growing imbalance between spatial permanence and social contraction. Historic centres remain physically present, yet increasingly disconnected from stable patterns of habitation and use.

Answer to the Research Question - Applicability of Inland-Area Policies

The research indicates that policies developed for inland and marginal areas are only partially applicable to historic centres in medium-sized towns. While these territories share demographic fragility and service vulnerability, they differ significantly in terms of urban form, heritage concentration, institutional complexity, and symbolic centrality within wider territorial systems.

As a result, direct policy transfer is insufficient. What emerges instead is the need to adapt inland area principles to an urban historic condition. The strategic framework proposed in this thesis extends beyond service enhancement. By integrating selective concentration, adaptive reuse, curated non-use, and inter municipal cooperation, it responds to the specific spatial and institutional conditions of shrinking historic centres. Inland-area principles are therefore not rejected, but reinterpreted and adapted to an urban-historic context.

Contributions of the Thesis - Theory, Method, and Planning Practice

Theoretical Contribution

At a theoretical level, this thesis contributes to the understanding of *historic centres as fragile yet persistent cores within shrinking territories.* It reframes shrinkage not as urban failure, but as a condition requiring administrative and spatial recalibration. By introducing curated non-use as part of a strategic framework, the research expands regeneration discourse beyond activation and growth.

Methodological Contribution

Methodologically, the thesis integrates **territorial scale diagnostics with micro scale spatial layering.** The use of demographic trends, functional vitality mapping, heritage condition assessment, accessibility constraints, and actor networks provides a structured basis for identifying intervention areas.

The comparative calibration between Enna and Biella demonstrates how a shared framework can adapt to different shrinkage typologies. While Enna reflects advanced demographic contraction and institutional fragility, Biella illustrates post-industrial restructuring and commercial retraction. This dual reading strengthens the transferability of the strategy without imposing uniform solutions.

Contribution to Planning Practice

In terms of planning practice, the thesis advances a **model of territorial stewardship grounded in governance continuity, incremental intervention, and coordinated funding mechanisms.** It emphasises that shrinkage strategies must be embedded within institutional capacity and long-term monitoring structures to avoid remaining symbolic.

The research proposes a framework that combines spatial calibration with governance continuity. It emphasises that funding must be approached through layered and cooperative mechanisms. Intermunicipal structures, such as Unione dei Comuni and Area Interna programmes, enable municipalities to pool administrative capacity and align strategic priorities.

Funding is understood not only as capital investment for physical transformation, but also as support for maintenance, programming, and long-term management. Local actors, associations, cooperatives, religious institutions, and small enterprises play a crucial role in translating spatial interventions into sustained activity. Without stewardship and operational continuity, physical proposals risk remaining symbolic.

The thesis therefore reframes **revitalisation as an incremental and coordinated process, rooted in institutional support and local capacity**.

Limitations and Future Research

The thesis also recognises that the effectiveness of these strategies depends on their continuity over time. Shrinkage unfolds across long temporal horizons, while planning actions are often constrained by short political cycles and project-based funding. Without continuous monitoring and adjustment, even well structured strategies risk becoming fragmented or symbolic. Selective concentration may lose its social balance, adaptive heritage management may turn into selective neglect, and inter-municipal cooperation may remain largely formal.

For this reason, governance and monitoring should be considered integral components of any shrinkage strategy. The ability to track changes in habitation, service provision, heritage reuse, and social composition is essential to maintaining coherence over time. Planning should therefore be understood less as a fixed outcome and more as an ongoing process of adaptation and learning.

Ultimately, this work opens a broader question that extends beyond the individual case studies: ***how can shrinking cities be governed over the long term, beyond the lifespan of specific plans, projects, or political mandates?*** Addressing this question is central to the future of historic centres in Italia di Mezzo and to the development of planning approaches capable of responding realistically to long-term territorial change.

Final Reflection

The condition of Italia di Mezzo calls for a planning approach that neither pursues unrealistic growth nor accepts passive decline. Medium-sized towns occupy a critical position within the Italian territorial system. They function as service nodes, cultural reference points, and administrative anchors for surrounding areas. When these towns weaken, the impact extends beyond municipal boundaries, affecting wider provincial and intermediate territories.

Within this structure, the historic centre plays a decisive role. It is not simply a preserved fragment of the past, but the spatial and symbolic core of the town. It concentrates public institutions, collective memory, architectural continuity, and urban identity. Even under conditions of shrinkage, it remains the primary framework through which everyday life, governance, and social interaction are organised.

Revitalising a medium-sized town therefore cannot occur through peripheral expansion or isolated development projects. It requires reinforcing the historic centre as a managed and inhabited core, capable of sustaining daily practices, public presence, and institutional continuity. The stability of the historic centre directly influences the stability of the town as a whole. If the core erodes, the broader territorial role of the town becomes fragile.

Recognising this relationship elevates the importance of intermediate towns within national policy debates. **These are neither residual spaces nor secondary settlements, but structurally significant components of Italy's urban system. Their historic centres should not be treated as relics of past growth, but as managed cultural landscapes capable of long-term adaptation.**

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Grazie...