# THE DISCOVERY OF ABANDONED VILLAGES IN ABRUZZO.
# EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF DRAWING AS A RESEARCH METHOD

**Giovanni Caffio**
Università degli Studi "G. d'Annunzio" Chieti-Pescara
Department of Architecture
giovanni.caffio@unich.it

SMALL TOWNS
DRAWING
ABANDONMENT
ATLAS
ABRUZZO

This research underscores the vast importance of architectural drawing in the examination of cultural and material heritage in hamlets grappling with a slow abandonment. The representation of towns and villages holds great significance, as it forms the basis for potential architectural, economic, and social endeavours, while also enabling the establishment of communal areas where diverse communities can nurture their shared visions. In order to delve deeper into the subject, an atlas of municipalities in Abruzzo with populations below 500 offers a remarkable chance to stimulate reflection on the factors influencing a drawing that can shape narratives of abandonment through the use of various descriptive methods and tools. Moreover, this endeavour allows for the exploration of new avenues for future sustainable development and revitalization, fostering a sense of identity and gaining pride within these communities.

In today's world, there is a growing need to study and document the different heritage of material and immaterial cultures found in small towns at risk of disappearing due to a slow but inevitable demographic decline. This heritage is acknowledged to play a crucial role in shaping a collective future for towns, regardless of their size or location, whether they are considered central or peripheral, coastal or mountainous – regardless of the dichotomies we use to describe this intricate and elusive reality.

By researching and recording the rich heritage of these endangered hamlets, we can acquire valuable knowledge about their past, customs, and way of living. This information enables us to recognize the distinctiveness of each culture and promote a greater comprehension and admiration for our collective culture. It is through the safeguarding and exploration of cultural heritage that we can lay the groundwork for a more encompassing and interconnected global community.

The significance of this heritage should not be overlooked, as it is through the examination and recording of these cultures (both tangible and intangible) that we gain insight into the lives and perspectives of individuals from diverse locations and eras. This comprehension allows us to create spaces of empathy amidst communities and cultures that are growing further apart. Furthermore, the exploration of this legacy is not solely a subject of intellectual inquisitiveness, scholarly fascination, or historical conservation. This legacy also serves as a crucial economic and social asset that can be utilized to generate employment opportunities, stimulate tourism, and foster the sustainable advancement of mindful communities. By embracing a comprehensive approach to the portrayal and safeguarding of heritage, we can guarantee its enduring vitality and influential role in the advancement of regions.

The challenges related to preserving the heritage of small towns are varied and plentiful. Tackling these challenges necessitates a collaborative approach that

includes multiple disciplines, along with the involvement of civil society and the private sector. However, the advantages of this endeavour are clear and go beyond simply documenting historical structures and artifacts. By studying and promoting our shared heritage through various methods, we also invest in our collective future and lay the foundation for a fair and economically viable future.

Small towns are gaining increasing recognition as significant contributors to today's discourse. This recognition is largely attributed to various exhibitions (Cucinella, 2018), studies –such as the publications coordinated by Carmine Donzelli on the topic of depopulation (Lucatelli et al., 2022); (Barbera & De Rossi, 2021); (De Rossi, 2020); (Cersosimo & Donzelli, 2020)– and conferences (Oteri & Scamardì, 2020; Pignatti, 2020; Fiore & D'Andria, 2019) that have highlighted their strategic importance and potential.

Small municipalities have always played a crucial role in history, but in the current socio-economic climate, their significance is even more apparent, albeit seemingly peripheral. This is occurring during a time when there is a complex crisis involving cultural, economic, and technological paradigms, which are prompting a re-evaluation of the tenets of post-industrial and liberalist progress. This model has long been seen as inevitable because it is supported by a widespread and global digital network.

Historians, economists, and technologists are currently reassessing the assumptions that underpin the concept of infinite growth. The question arises as to whether progress can truly be synonymous with such growth and whether a global digital network can genuinely be seen as 'ubiquitous'. In this ongoing discussion, small cities, with their resilient social and economic structures, can be seen as vital components. Furthermore, small towns provide a distinct viewpoint on the

ongoing crisis that has impacted all facets of contemporary life. By studying how they are adjusting to this crisis, researchers and policymakers can obtain valuable insights into the difficulties confronting larger cities. Small towns have always shown their ability to bounce back and can showcase their resilience once more in the midst of this crisis.

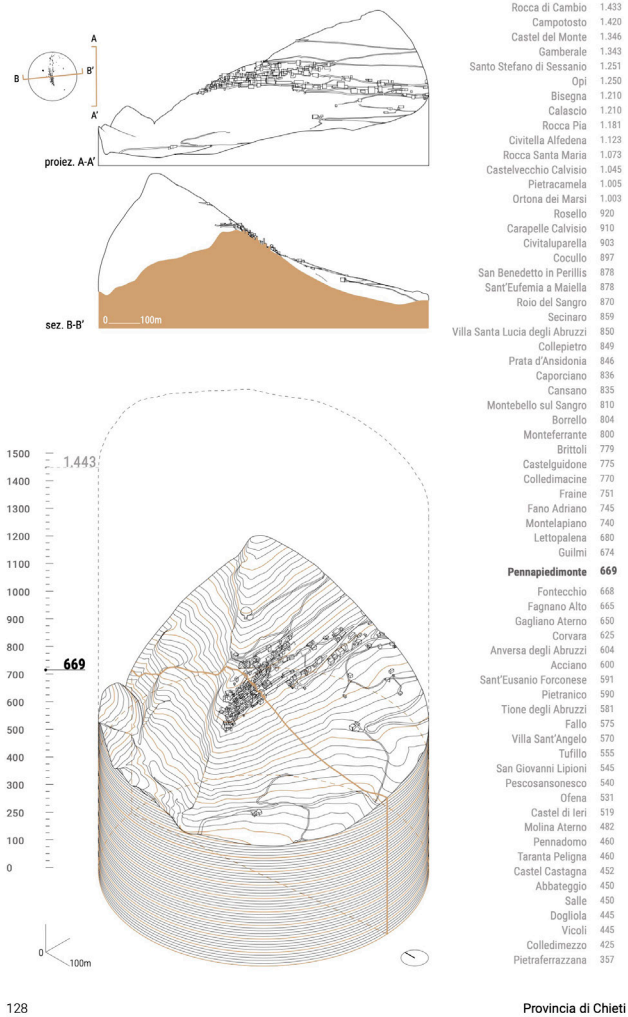As noted by Pierluigi Sacco (2020), this is a good time to consider the future of peripheral areas. Sacco em-



**Fig. 1** This isometric axonometry shows a portion of the municipality territory of Pennapiedimonte (CH). It aids in understanding the connection between the village and the surrounding topography, as well as comparing the village's elevation with that of other regions. The page contains noteworthy sections and a frontal orthogonal projection of the model. The images presented here serve as an illustration of the research, analysis, and drawing efforts undertaken in *Atlante dei borghi solitari d'Abruzzo* (Caffio, 2022).

phasizes that during a crisis that disrupts the connectivity of the system, we come to understand the crucial significance of proximity, local social micro-networks, and community social capital. These factors allow us to direct our attention and concern towards even the most vulnerable aspects of society, highlighting their important role in our society and economy.

Italy has successfully launched numerous projects and initiatives that have turned marginalized situations into opportunities for cultural and territorial development. These efforts have created new spaces where culture and society can establish positive connections.

The State has taken a significant step in safeguarding smaller towns with the implementation of the 'Save Villages Law', Law No. 2541 of 27 September 2017. This law establishes a fund of 100 million euros until 2023 to carry out measures aimed at restoring abandoned historic centres or those facing depopulation risks. The law builds upon the 2013 *National Strategy of Inner Areas*, which was promoted by the Agency for Territorial Cohesion. The most recent initiative is the National Village Plan within the PNNR, which aims to revitalize 250 villages. Among these, 21 have been identified by the regions, while the remaining 229 have been selected through a public notice.

However, there are several initiatives by associations and individuals aimed at promoting these villages. These include the Club of the 'Most Beautiful Villages in Italy' and the 'Bandiere arancioni' program of the Italian Touring Club. Additionally, there is a vibrant and active network called BorghiIN, established by Confcooperative Abruzzo (*www.borghiinrete.it*). In addition to the proposals organized at the national and regional levels, many ideas also arise from the grassroots level. These bottom-up experiments stem from the formation of a network among individuals living in or visiting specific areas, who have chosen to collaborate and en-
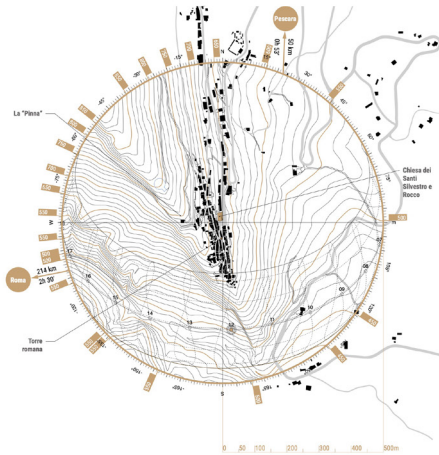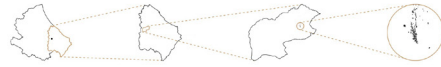
**Pennapiedimonte**

**445** pennesi al 1° gennaio 2020

42°09'07" N
14°11'41" E

**Altitudine:** 669 m s.l.m.
**Superficie:** 47,03 km²
**Densità:** 9,5 ab./km²
**Class. sismica:** 1 (alta)

**Frazioni:** Capolegrotti, Coste Aranciata, Colli, Coste dei Colli, Defenza, Fontana, Laio, Pisavini, Raiese, San Giovanni, Vicende





AGEA 2013

vision new ways of living and enhancing their surroundings. In these seemingly stagnant and neglected areas, one can observe the presence of active energies. There are forces that leverage community dynamics and aim to establish connections between networks, tapping into their untapped resources and talents. They achieve this by staying attuned to social and cultural changes, as demonstrated by ongoing initiatives in the energy community and repopulation efforts, such as those in the municipality of Gagliano Aterno in the province of L'Aquila.

When examining the situation in Italy, both at the national and local levels, a fragmented and disorganized picture becomes apparent. This disarray is a result of the continuous enactment of laws and announcements, as well as the existence of multiple seemingly contra-

**Fig. 2** Each municipality is described through a fact sheet consisting of six pages. The first page provides a summary sheet with essential data, such as altitude, surface area, population density, seismic classification, and the hamlets within the municipality. It also includes a planimetric representation at a scale of 1:10.000, created from the Regional Technical Map at a scale of 1:5.000 (available on the Abruzzo Region Geoportal, updated in 2007). The second page displays the coordinates of the location (latitude and longitude) in the top right corner, along with a QR code that links to a Google Maps page. At the bottom, there are graphs showing the municipality's location in relation to the Region and Province it belongs to, as well as its territorial extent. In the centre, there is a satellite image (Orthophoto 1:10.000 [2013] AGEA - exec. flights RTI BLOM CGR - e-Geos) for direct comparison with the plan on the left page.

dictory strategies and visions to address the pervasive issue of abandoned villages.

Some initiatives aim to revitalize small towns by implementing tourism-based economies or enhancing capital. Others are exploring new models of economic development that involve both permanent and new local community members, encouraging cultural and productive innovation.

Although many research studies have explored and studied numerous experiments and initiatives in innovation, creativity, and grassroots-level planning, these efforts are often sporadic and fragmented, resulting in a lack of significant and widespread impact.

We can observe the coexistence of various perspectives: from an interventionist approach, whether it comes from higher authorities or grassroots movements, to a viewpoint that acknowledges the inevitable decline of the remaining population centres. The latter presents a pragmatic and realistic scenario, albeit one that may challenge our emotional connection to the past, particularly when the conditions for its preservation no longer exist. One might question the value of opposing a phenomenon that could be seen as just another part of humanity's ongoing evolution and quest for new habitable areas (Cocco, 2016, p. 22). The objective of revitalizing villages to their former state needs to be reassessed considering the substantial economic and social transformations that have occurred.

In addition to this fatalist view, we can consider an intermediate perspective that acknowledges the impracticality of preserving the heritage of all countries due to limitations in resources and expediency. Instead, efforts can be focused on a select few cases while implementing appropriate strategies to mitigate the risks, decline, and environmental crises faced by the others (Curci & Zanfi, 2020). We cannot determine which of these roads will ultimately succeed. All of them

have the potential for success, or none of them may succeed, or only some may succeed in specific locations. However, it is evident that we possess a rich heritage of architecture, landscapes, memories, and cultures that serve as a valuable resource for society. We must not allow this heritage to diminish without engaging in collective thinking and action. Each individual can contribute to this endeavour using their own knowledge and skills. The purpose of these pages is to explore how representation can aid in research on the depopulation of villages in Abruzzo. Alongside collecting, organizing, analysing, and presenting quantitative data on the identified areas in the four provinces of Abruzzo, we have adopted an adaptive and inclusive approach to representation. By incorporating other visual fields and methods such as nomography and photography, we aimed to encourage conversations and connections. Ultimately, the drawings produced will be interpreted by readers, who may be urban residents eager to learn more about the lesser-known inland territory or the villagers themselves, who will see their own territory recognized and analysed from a fresh perspective.

Drawing is not considered a work of art in itself, but rather an open and receptive space capable of accommodating a wide range of information. It serves as a fertile ground where disciplines such as architecture, history, economics, demography, and photography can converge and be compared. Through their interdisciplinary interplay, these disciplines can collaborate to offer valid interpretations, decode ongoing changes in processes, and establish a solid foundation for making informed decisions and anticipating potential solutions.

The atlas (Caffio, 2022) poses an open challenge to representation: can a drawing effectively convey the loss and disappearance of objects and people? Is it possible for a drawing to depict both what exists and what is absent? The drawings in this atlas strive to material-

ize stories of abandonment by capturing the essence of architectural elements, bridging the present with the near and distant past. As Manlio Brusatin (1993, p. XI) writes:

In the beginning, there is a line on the horizon where before there was almost nothing. And afterwards, there is a high and a low, a right and a left, a right and a wrong, a beginning and an end: the encircle-
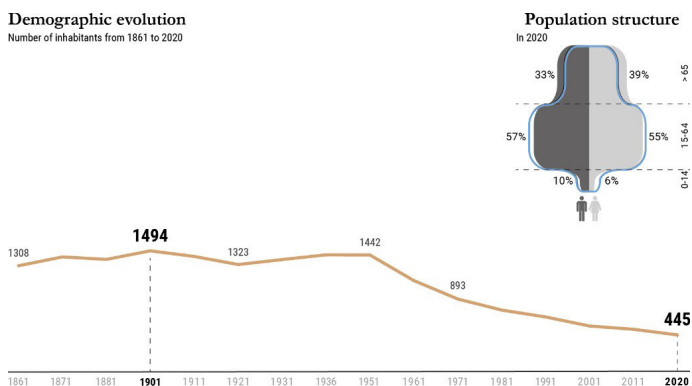


**Fig. 3** The data design includes an infographic with several diagrams based on Istat sources (https://demo.istat.it/). These diagrams depict the evolution of the demographic trend from 1861 to 2020, the structure of the population in 2020 by gender within three main age groups (0-14, 15-64, and over 65), and a comparison of this data with the situation in Abruzzo and Italy. Additionally, there is a radar chart that visually summarizes key demographic indices, such as the foreigners index (the percentage of foreign population in relation to the total population) and the average per capita income of the municipality for the 2020 - 2019 tax year.
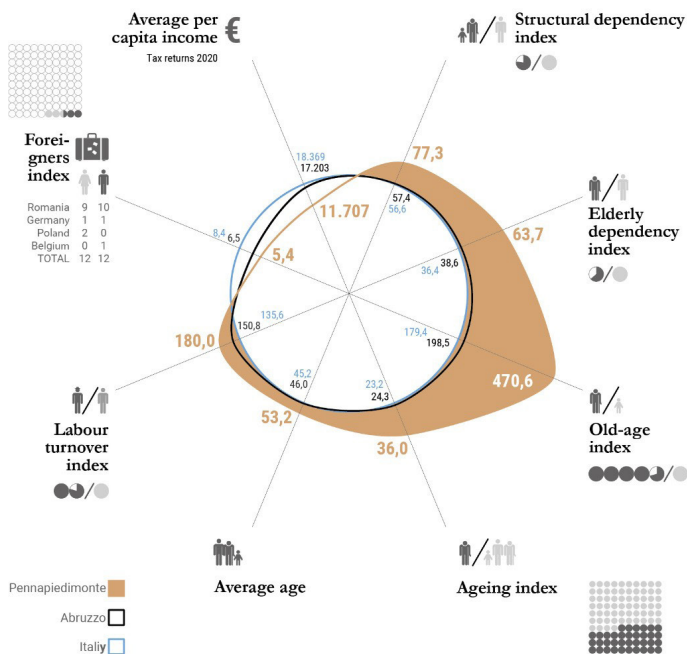
ment of our own sight. Any line cannot be crossed in vain because it is never firm or because it becomes too high. A line unites, yes, but also divides. It becomes an arrow with an elusive, now-violent direction that breaks the heart.

The drawings in the atlas aim to create a deliberate ambiguity, achieved by using 'abstract objects' like numbers and demographic indices, along with their diagrammatic forms, as well as 'objective abstractions' such as terrain sections and orthogonal projections of three-dimensional models. The drawings use the same elements of language –lines and points– but they depict different spaces: solid mineral matter of geology and architecture on one hand, and the ephemeral and constantly changing matter of demographic data on the

**Fig. 4** Each municipality is accompanied by a brief text description that indicates its geographical location, urban structure with its main buildings and historical monuments, as well as a selection of photographs taken by architectural photographer Giuseppe Marino.



Pennapiedimonte is located on a steep rocky ridge overlooking the Avello river valley, on the slopes of the eastern slope of the Maiella. The dwellings, with walls made of local stone, have the characteristic of being partly dug into the rock, a very ancient custom as witnessed by the presence of rupestrian houses in the area. The urban layout precisely follows the contour lines according to a north-south orientation and is characterised by narrow, steep steps, only passable on foot, connecting the different levels.
Archaeological traces show that the area was already inhabited in the 6th century B.C. and a Roman tower, now incorporated into the village and housing the local museum on the Italic necropolis, indicates that the village was under Roman control from the 3rd century B.C. onwards.

The original part was located higher up, on the Avella gorges, and controlled several hamlets (l'amocchiano, Ugno, Civitas Pinnae and Borgo Lucina) that were abandoned over time, leaving only that of Penna, today's Pennapiedimonte. Today, the hamlet's most important architectural feature is the Church of Saints Silvestro and Rocco located in the lower part of the central Piazza Umberto I. Dating back to the 18th century, it has a Baroque façade flanked by a square bell tower.
At the top, however, is the 'Cimirocco' (literally 'at the foot of the mountain'), a rocky spur or fin that forms a natural arch and which tradition associates with the goddess Maja. The municipality is part of the Majella National Park.
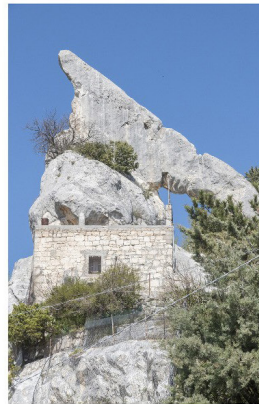
other. The representations are intentionally impartial, achieved through the use of a highly symbolic code that addresses the fundamental question of perception: we can only see what we know, and we know what we see.

Representation is viewed as an ongoing exploration of the nature of design and its applications. It also examines the interaction between perception and the represented object, as well as the possibility or impossibility of such representations.

The process of creating signs helps to reveal hidden aspects of reality while also making the already obvious aspects less noticeable. It is a strategy to overcome the challenge of perceiving reality, which can be influenced by everyday familiarity or cultural biases shaped by collective imagination. For instance, the commercial stereotype of the village as a charming and idealized place from the past (Barbera et al., 2022).

This decision enables both the artist and the viewer to shift their attention. The artist emphasizes the anonymity and intricacy of the depicted object, while the viewer concentrates on the ambiguity of the depicted object.

The gaze shifts across the drawings, alternating between what is visible and what is not. This constant fluctuation continually modifies our perception and thoughts, creating a space that is not conducive to definite, unquestionable observations, but is abundant in subtleties: a misalignment between thought and vision.

Drawing deviates from the perspective point of view, which is typically associated with photography, and challenges the idea that seeing equates to understanding. It achieves this by both rejecting and perpetuating the traditions of cartographic, architectural, and nomographic representation.

Through its use of codes, simplifications, and omissions, drawing does not guide the viewer towards a clear comprehension where all the pieces fit together perfectly

like a jigsaw puzzle. Unlike drawings where obscured parts marked with a dot can be reconstructed to form a complete image, here the puzzle is never solved. Each suggestion of possible meaning leads to uncertainty and a continuous cross-referencing of ambiguity.

Similar to a mystery novel with an open ending, the observer must rely on the circumstantial method to solve the mystery (Ginzburg, 1983). This method is based on peripheral yet revealing information, often overlooked as unimportant, but which actually holds the key to understanding complex situations. The true value of this method lies in its capacity to establish connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena, such as a terrain contour line and the demographic evolution of a population.

The different depictions that present a fragmented and transitory portrayal of these countries are illustrations of something that is vanishing. As a result, they represent the act of disappearance, of transition from fullness to emptiness. This emptiness specifically refers to the gap between reality and its representation, between the routine of everyday life and the capacity to construct a fresh viewpoint of reality through aesthetic intuition.

Through the exploration of drawing as a research method, this study sheds light on the importance of representation in examining cultural and material heritage in abandoned villages. By capturing the essence of architectural elements and bridging the present with the past, drawing becomes a powerful tool for shaping narratives of abandonment and fostering a sense of identity and pride within these communities.

As we continue to study and document the diverse heritage of endangered small towns, we gain valuable knowledge about their past, customs, and way of living. This knowledge not only promotes a greater comprehension for our collective heritage but also lays the foundation for a more inclusive and interconnected future. By safeguarding and exploring all these different aspects of

cultural heritage, we contribute to the advancement of regions, create spaces of empathy, and foster a deeper understanding among communities (both from the cities and the hamlets) and cultures.

In conclusion, the research presented in this paper underscores the significance of drawing as a research method in examining depopulated villages. It offers insights into the complex realities of these communities and provides a foundation for future studies and interventions aimed at preserving cultural heritage and fostering sustainable development.

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