

OAA Perspectives

The Journal of the
Ontario Association
of Architects

Volume 22, Number 4

Winter 2014/2015 \$5.00

ALL THAT WE INHERIT



Ontario Association of Architects



SKELETONS Amongst the WALLS

THE MAGIC OF GHOST TOWNS

BY ROCCO MARAGNA, B.ARCH., M. ARCH. (UD), OAA
AND ARABELLA MORELLI

In the Castle of Roccascalegna,
resides the legend of the so-called
rule of the "jus primae noctis."

Italy has been a destination for architects, artists and poets for centuries. Many of our colleagues have trodden the well-worn path, either spurred by the lucid lectures of Professor Acland; or, more recently, by the web and Hollywood movies. The original Grand Tour concentrated mostly on the architecture of the three epicentres of Italian culture: Rome, Florence and Venice, reflecting a bias perpetrated and perpetuated by the intellectual and cultural intelligentsia. Needless to say, we obediently follow the beaten tracks that link this well-known trio. Without a doubt many have

ventured off to such exotic places as Cinque Terre, Lago di Como and the Amalfi Coast, each a story unto itself. This has relegated many other cities such as Napoli, Palermo and L'Aquila, to a lesser classification. But they too have contributed and continue to contribute to the complex wealth of Italian culture.

Few, however, have ventured into locales that offer a timeless character: the pre-mediaeval and mediaeval towns that perch on the Apennines of Abruzzo, that grew out of nature's harmonious duality that is both balanced and breathtaking while, at the same time, providing a satisfying sense of place. This resultant vernacular fabric, has distinguished the region by having a record number of "*Borghi Piu' Belli d'Italia*," second only to Umbria. But, behind this statistic there is a sad truth: the "forsaken borghi" that are either on their last gasp or, even worse, abandoned and forgotten.

Noble ruins, castle towers shrunken by time, roofs collapsed under the strain of neglect – where once there was a cooking corner now lives a wild fig tree. Bramble and ivy cover the memories of a vernacular life that spans centuries and now is no more. Marvellous *borghi*

appear throughout the Abruzzo region of Italy like ghosts amongst mountains and vales. Carefully perched on ridges or gracefully laid on lush valleys, silently smiling at their timeless landscape, being a balanced collaboration between humans and the environment. The whole symbolism of the different souls of Abruzzo, a region of central Italy, has been imagined for centuries to be on the very borders of reality, in an almost fantastical space.

Walking through the abandoned alleys, one only hears the murmur of the wind; its touch is like a floating feather, changing as each season makes its visit to the mnemonic stones. Nature has taken back its territory and it seems that the ruined walls were always like this and that those houses were built with the vegetation as an integral part of their interiors. These ruins have a timeless architectural dignity, contrary to the contemporary built forms that bite at the ridges of the old fabric.

In the Decameron, Boccaccio has Calandrino say, "*piu' la che Abruzzi*" (further than the Abruzzi), referring to the philosopher stone's whereabouts. The region was seen as a wild yet hospitable place, remote yet gentle, primitive yet poetic, as witnessed by Romantic writers, from Ann Radcliffe to Edward Lear. The Dutch artist M. C. Escher, whose well known lithograph



"collapsed roofs under the strain
of neglect..." in Cansano.

was first printed in February 1930, depicts the village of Castrovalva, which lies at the top of a sheer slope *altro che* penthouses.

Abruzzo was in reality a cradle of civilization and Boccaccio himself was well aware of this when he travelled to Naples from his native Florence, possibly following the routes known as *tratturi*, where the seasonal movement of people with their sheep, known as *transumanza*, took place between summer and winter pastures. This annual movement was well underway and was known to the Latin poet Ovid, born in 46 BC, in Sulmo, present day Sulmona. This bucolic poet of love and mysterious ancient myths intones:

See the flowing streams with happy murmurs:
see the sheep grazing on the fertile grass.
Behold, the goats seek the rocks and steep boulders:
soon they'll bring back full udders for their kids:
The shepherd blows a melody on his reed pipes,
no lack of dogs for company, a watchful crowd.

Similar sentiments were echoed, more than 2000 years later, by the poet D'Annunzio in his poem *The Shepherds*, celebrating this lost culture:

September, let us depart. It is time to migrate.
Now in the land of Abruzzi my shepherds
Leave the pens and go towards the sea:
Descending to the savage Adriatic
Green like the pastures of the mountains.

Along the *tratturi*, also trodden by pilgrims, monks, templars, vassals and armies, settlements sprung up and in time became towns and villages: from modest dwellings to large villas, from workers houses to residences of the noble class. With the disappearance of the transhumance in the annals of history, the ancient peoples proud and wise even before Rome, fled in the wake of famine, earthquakes, wars and migration. Leaving behind an uneasy and damned territory and the *borghi* were abandoned. To this day the *borghi* names are evocative and indicative of the distance in time and place: Buonanotte, Carapelle Calvisio, Forno, Tavolero, Rocca Calascio, Servillo, San Lorenzo, Gioia Vecchia, Corvara, Cansano, Vallenquina e Vicus Turtus. Abandoned they may be, however, their memories live on in places indeed "much further than the Abruzzi," such as Frederick, U.S.A.; Perth, Australia; Toronto, Canada.

These ruins are not owned by anyone, and so they belong to all or to none. They are places in which imaginations roam through all the could-have-been and might-have-been that light small flames of mystery and wonder, reminding all of something spent and ignored: that nothing lasts forever.

The charm of the vernacular is appreciated by "foreigners" who are increasingly appropriating and appreciating the remains that the locals have decried. But a house is not just a building made of walls and a roof, it is an intrinsic part of the place from which it cannot and should not be disengaged. As Calvino's *Invisible Cities* entices us to look beyond appearances, beyond the obvious if we want to discover what makes each place unique and unforgettable, as he does in his recount of Ersilia:

to establish the relationships that sustain the city's life, the inhabitants stretch strings from the corners of the houses, white or black or grey or black-and-white according to whether they mark a relationship of blood, of trade, or authority, agency. When the strings become so numerous that you can no longer pass among them, the inhabitants leave, the houses are dismantled; only the strings and their supports remain.

One wonders if the foreigners who buy these ruins are able to safeguard the patina of yesteryears and can add to it, creating new relationships, stories and feelings, which the inheriting stones have nurtured and safeguarded for years. Or is it no longer the responsibility of those who have them re-appropriated in order to leave



ALL PHOTOS: ROCCO MARAGNA

"Nature has taken back its territory..." in Cansano.

to their children a gift that has more than an economic value?

These ghost towns permeate stories and legends of people that have inhabited them and that had to leave them for places at times unknown. One day while going through my late father's old wallet, amongst the few belonging left behind, I came across documents that related to an abandoned property in one of these ghost towns. It had, I discovered, no economic value, instead it provided a far greater worth, for in it I found my origins and learned of the sacrifices made by the inhabitants, who for centuries survived the conditions of time.

These *borghi* are ghosts amidst transitory nature, mockingly and silently smiling in their timeless landscape. Like tattered and faded books begging to be picked up, restored and read again; or reformatted, printed anew to partake of present realities.

Rocco Maragna is principal of *Maragna Architect Inc.* and founder of the *Gallery of Human Migration*. His book "*The Magic of Ghost Towns*" is in the works.

Arabella Morelli is an Italian architect and artist. Her works are influenced by textures, materials, landscapes and the cultural history of old towns.



The Castle of Rocca Calascio at an elevation of 1460 metres.