Narrative cartographies as an analytical and prospective tool to unveil the concealed potential of vacant heritage places.

Ignacio Galán-Fernández (1); Ángel Comeras-Serrano (2); Yves Schoonjans (1); Gisèle Gantois (1).

(1) KU Leuven, Department of Architecture, Gent (Belgium); (2): Universidad San Jorge, Facultad de Arquitectura, Zaragoza (España).

Abstract
The depopulation of rural territories in the last decades has left a large amount of empty spaces. Consequently, these vernacular heritage spaces are getting transformed, implying a loss of local cultural material and immaterial values, and the waste of the spatial qualities which the existing places still have.

Until recently, few attention has been dedicated by external users, towards the local values of these spaces which make them potentially recoverable.

This article aims to discuss the potential of using an analytical methodology, with the aim of identifying the intrinsic qualities from an existing space, and the necessary interventions to mediate among the interest of different users, facing other global processes that threaten the territory.

Through the elaboration of narrative cartographies on different scales -from the territory to the built element-, which combine the spatial configuration and the interest of several agents in using them, as well as the impact of global processes, it is possible to obtain a deeper understanding of the transformation of these existing spaces. At the same time, it allows to unveil the potential which other similar places have, achieving the development of more efficient intervention strategies and principles for their adaptation and reuse.

Keywords
Socio-spatial mapping, Spatiality, Multiscale, Heritage, Adaptive reuse.
1. Introduction

Throughout history, human-beings have continuously built, inhabited, adapted and abandoned their spaces of life, as their needs and local conditions for settling have evolved and changed (Corboz 1983). However, territories have been subject in the last decades of unprecedented fast and large-scale transformations triggered by urbanisation and globalisation processes (Antrop 2004).

Rural depopulation is one of them, a phenomenon which currently affects many regions, being especially intense in isolated mountain areas. As a consequence, a large number territories get progressively unoccupied, creating a big cultural loss due to the disappearance of these places, and raising many challenges to remaining shrinking communities who still live in them. At the same time, some neighbouring areas, often better located than the shrinking ones, are experiencing a strong urbanising pressure, whose big infrastructures are transforming the existing cultural landscape (Koolhaas 2020).

However, among these simultaneous processes, the change of certain conditions have also attracted the interest of different types of users about these existing vacant spaces, initiating their recovery. The space is normally used in a very different way than it used to be, conceived revealing a strong adaptation capacity. The spatial qualities of the vernacular spaces cherished in each case, differ depending on the type of involved user. Based on those conditions and attributed qualities, the vernacular spaces transform differently, creating very heterogeneous results (Carlow 2016).

This phenomenon gives context to the investigation in which the research method is applied. The use of socio-spatial analysis tools, for the construction of the narrative cartographies from the place, enables to develop the research beyond the mere obtention of data (Cattoor & Perkins 2014; Corner 2011). The elaboration of narrative cartographies on different scales -from the territory to the built element- makes it possible to obtain a deeper understanding of the transformation of these existing spaces. These narrative cartographies combine the spatial configuration and the interest of several agents in using them, as well as the impact of global processes. (Misrach & Orff 2014). At the same time, it allows to unveil the potential which other similar places have, achieving the development of more efficient intervention strategies and principles for their adaptation and reuse.

2. Objectives

This research aims to discuss the capacity of the socio-spatial analytical method, through its graphic expression:

1 – To understand graphically the transformation of the spatial conditions which allow the recovery of activity in a depopulated place.
2 – To identify the strategies applied for the adaptation of these spaces.
3 – To evaluate the spatial impact obtained, enabling to discuss the potential application of these graphic strategies and intervention principles in other places.

3. The analysis of the study case of Isín, Huesca.

Among the different experiences investigated, this article focuses in the analysis of the case of Isín, a small settlement depopulated in 1961, and whose ruins started to be recovered and adapted in 1998. This research does not aim to be able to replicate the exact experience of the case, but to understand the process and the strategies applied, as a way of establishing a graphic methodology which could be used to approach other cases with similar characteristics and challenges.

The research methodology applied in Isín consists of a socio-spatial graphic analysis in different scales, which combines data obtained from existing graphic sources, with the information obtained from in-situ spatial survey and the realization of semi-structured interviews to the different involved stakeholders. Existing graphic documents, such as vectorized cartography or digitalized maps are gathered from digitally-available databases. More detailed spatial data is collected on site through sketches and fieldnotes, photographs or drone images. In-depth interviews with local users, about their interests and use of space, are transcribed into text, and their references made to spaces registered in base maps.

The collected data is translated into graphic documents which show the spatial interrelation between these aspects. These graphic documents (maps) include two- and three-dimensional representations: plans, sections, elevations, axonometric- and perspective-views.

This allows to understand: the spatial configuration -originally, depopulated and adapted- of the vernacular spaces; the interest from the users in the qualities which they perceive from the existing spaces, and which triggers their adaptation; and the new activity which they develop in them. It provides a multiscale vision, which allow to develop better integrated interventions and with a higher impact. From the graphical analysis of the territorial structure, the scale of landscape, the space of the settlement and the built structures, it will be possible to provide novel insights in the processes of recovery, spatial and urban design, and landscape and territorial planning (Comeras et al. 2018).

The process of intervening sensitively in an existing space implies the permanent mediation between the original state and the values which heritage spaces have. It allows its respectful adaptation to current conditions, which facilitate the recovery of activity. For that reason, the developed strategies combine a first analytical part, with a second purposeful part.

The use of different graphic scales, combined with several graphic representation systems produces a progressive approach from the territory to the built element. Based on that, different graphic strategies are developed.
- First of all, the strategies at the scale of the territory seek to establish new connections with the existing network of settlements, and other spaces which have a potential for the new functions foreseen (Figure 2).

- In second place, the strategies at the scale of the landscape enable to understand the logics of the adaptation of the settlement to their location, reformulating the link between the settlement and the cultural landscape which it forms part of (Figure 3).

- Thirdly, the strategies at the scale of the settlement will enable the adaptation of dysfunctional spaces of the settlement, looking for a balance between the qualities and opportunities which the existing buildings allow in relation to their landscape, and the spatial adaptation required (Figures 4, 5 & 6).

- At last, the strategies at the scale of the built structures, which focus in the spatial materialization of the spaces, will aim to maintain the character of the vernacular buildings, by using local construction techniques and materials, but introducing technological improvements which enable the adaptation of these spaces to current spatial conditions (Figure 7).

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the case of Isín and its intervention in an existing settlement, following the socio-spatial graphic methodology developed, allows to unveil the undisclosed spatial qualities which their vernacular architecture has for certain users. The identification of the spatial conditions which facilitate certain experiences of recovery of settlements through the enhancement of vernacular heritage, can represent a crucial tool for planners, allowing to design more efficient strategies for rural territories. The use of spatial graphic representation techniques to combine the socio-spatial data collected, allows to
understand the aims and strategies which result in the different spatial interventions developed in the existing built heritage spaces.

The analysis in different scales, and the interaction between them provides a better understanding on how global processes and ongoing activities in the territory are increasingly conditioning the evolution of these spaces. By developing an investigation almost uniquely through graphic instruments will prove the analytical capacity of the processes of recovery of almost disappeared elements. A graphic methodology can lead to the creation of opportunities for recovery, to the spatial capacity of intervention, and to the implementation of updates and adaptations according to current and future needs. A methodology that can be extrapolated to other cases of recovery of existing spaces.

References


Biographical data of the Authors

Ignacio Galán-Fernández
KU Leuven – Department of Architecture / Faculty of Architecture; ignacio.galan@kuleuven.be

Architect - PhD Researcher. Research Group “Urban Projects, Collective Spaces & Local Identities” (KU Leuven). Rural heritage, reuse of the built heritage, cultural landscapes, urban-architectural design, shrinking settlements. ORCID [0000-0002-3284-0245]

Ángel B. Comeras-Serrano
Universidad San Jorge – Facultad de Arquitectura; abcomeras@usj.es


Yves Schoonjans
KU Leuven – Department of Architecture / Faculty of Architecture; yves.schoonjans@kuleuven.be


Gisèle Gantois
KU Leuven – Department of Architecture / Faculty of Architecture; gisèle.gantois@kuleuven.be

Architect MSc in Conservation - PhD in Architecture. Associate Professor. Research Group “Urban Projects, Collective Spaces & Local Identities” (KU Leuven). Community heritage, restoration and adaptive reuse, post-industrial – peri-urban and – post-disaster areas, socio-spatial research and design methodologies. ORCID [0000-0001-6009-7877]

Acknowledgements

The research of Ignacio Galán is funded by FWO Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Vlaanderen (Research Foundation, Flanders, Belgium).