


# Re-envisioning Rural Heritage as a Resource for Regeneration: The Case of Abandoned Farmhouses in Northern Italy

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## Abstract

*The rural landscape, formerly a dynamic center of agrarian life, currently confronts a multitude of challenges, encompassing depopulation, economic regression, and the deterioration of its built heritage. This article investigates how abandoned rural heritage can be repurposed to create new opportunities for rural communities. The North Oglia Park region in northern Italy serves as a case study, featuring numerous historic farmhouses and agricultural estates—along the Oglia tributary. Largely abandoned and deteriorating, these structures exemplify the area's neglected heritage. This research documents their current condition and explores their potential for local regeneration. To inform revitalization strategies, the study analyzes successful heritage reuse projects from related rural areas, considering factors like location, community engagement, financial resources, and sustainable maintenance. Drawing from these insights, the research develops a set of evaluation criteria to assess the potential for adaptive reuse of these rural structures. Initial reuse ideas and scenarios are presented, such as new agricultural ventures, agritourism centers, communal hubs, and educational or cultural institutions. By reimagining these structures, the research aims to redefine their role in sustainable regeneration and contribute to the broader discussion on the future of rural heritage and its potential to revitalize rural communities and cultural landscapes through adaptive reuse. With thoughtful planning, sustainable strategies, and active community involvement, these abandoned farmhouses could become valuable assets, driving economic growth, enhancing social cohesion, and preserving rural heritage.*

**Keywords:** rural heritage; abandoned farmhouses; evaluation criteria; adaptive reuse; regeneration

## 1. Introduction

The rural environment, once a vibrant landscape of agricultural activity, now faces significant challenges, including depopulation, economic decline, and the degradation of rural heritage. With the modernization of agriculture, many property owners have struggled to manage large rural estates, often abandoning or neglecting them in favor of urban migration. As a result,

rural buildings have been left unused or went through significant alterations to meet new needs.

Preserving rural buildings, especially barns and farmhouses, presents particular challenges, as these structures often lack modern infrastructure such as electricity, water, and sewage systems and require substantial investment for conservation and restoration works. Moreover,

their original use, such as housing livestock, may have resulted in persistent odours that require mitigation, while neglect may have led to structural deterioration and collapses, further complicating rehabilitation efforts. Furthermore, rural heritage, mainly privately owned, depends on stakeholders' priorities for its future, which may overlook its cultural or architectural value. Despite these challenges, historic rural estates still exhibit outstanding geomorphology, microclimate, and landscape qualities (Torreggiani & Tassinari, 2012).

The focus of this research is on abandoned “cascine” (hereafter farmhouses) located along the North Oglia Park in Lombardy (Fig. 1).

It is a type of agricultural settlement frequent in the Po Valley. It generally consists of a rectangular courtyard, enclosed by sheds and two main buildings (one of which serves as a dwelling for people, the other as a stable and haystack). This form of dwelling, different from the usual type of isolated dwelling, has its origins in the need for deep ploughing for cultivation or for cattle breeding, which in turn led to the existence of various buildings intended to shelter agricultural tools and livestock (Italian Encyclopedia, 1931).

These large structures, usually a few kilometres from inhabited centres, had stables, barns, granaries, and dairies around a courtyard (Fig. 2, 3). Larger farmhouses had multiple courtyards and housed several peasant families, varying by farm size. They thrived in the 18th–19th centuries but have declined since the early 20th century due to depopulation and agricultural modernization. Since the 1950s, industrialization and the repurposing of farmhouses in Italy have transformed the function and rural character of numerous sites (Torreggiani & Tassinari, 2012).

Currently, there is growing interest in revitalizing rural areas through initiatives such as ecotourism and innovative agricultural practices, particularly among young people and local communities.

Inspiring stories of young people returning to rural landscapes to foster business growth and drive sustainable development can be found in the “Stories of Young Businesses” within the “ReStartApp” and “ReStartAlp” projects by the Edoardo Garrone Foundation in Italy.



Fig. 1 – Diagrammatic map of Italy highlighting Lombardy (left), with a zoomed-in map of the study area (right). The Oglia tributary is marked in light blue, and the visited municipalities with blue diamond shapes (Psoma, 2025).



Fig. 2 – Courtyard and surrounding structures of Cascina Grottanuova, Bordolano, Cremona, Italy (Psoma, 2024).

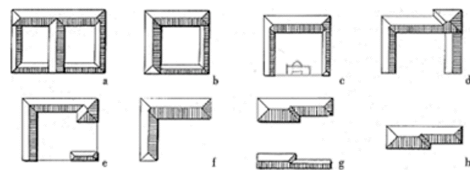


Fig. 3 – Plan Typologies of Rural Buildings in Brescia, Italy (Paoletti & Fappani, 2015).

Following the introduction, Section 2 outlines the research objectives, while Section 3 describes the methodology used. Section 4 presents selected examples of adaptive reuse projects involving rural heritage, relating them to this research.

Section 5 introduces the study area, explores existing adaptation examples for farmhouses, and provides the list of evaluation criteria developed in this study. Section 6 discusses adaptive reuse strategies and scenarios, and the final Section 7 presents the conclusion.

## 2. Objectives

This research explores the potential of repurposing abandoned farmhouses to foster regeneration prospects for rural communities. It aims to identify strategies for preserving and sustainably managing these buildings, contributing to a unified framework that integrates heritage preservation with economic and social revitalization. The study focuses on the North Oglio Park area, in Lombardy, specifically examining the farmhouses as indicators of economic, technical, social, and visual changes in rural regions. To assess the adaptation and regeneration potential of these buildings, the research develops a set of evaluation criteria that can be applied to other rural structures in comparable contexts.

## 3. Methodology

This research adopts a structured approach to assess the adaptive reuse potential of the farmhouses. Initially, a bibliographic review was conducted to explore literature on adaptive reuse and regeneration practices. This was followed by the identification of successful adaptive reuse projects and examples related to rural heritage, which helped inform the research by highlighting key values, evaluation criteria, and success factors. The second phase involved site visits to the farmhouses in the study area. These visits allowed for a direct assessment of the buildings' current condition and context. A photographic archive was created to document the farmhouses, providing a visual record for analysis. In the third phase, a Farmhouse Index Card was created for each farmhouse to document key architectural, functional, and typological aspects. The fourth phase involved identifying several farmhouses

that had already been adapted. These steps, along with the previous analysis, helped develop preliminary evaluation criteria for assessing the potential for adaptive reuse of each farmhouse. These criteria are based on factors such as structural integrity, location, accessibility, stakeholder interest, community needs, and others. The final part of the research explored initial ideas for adaptation strategies and re-use scenarios for the farmhouses.

## 4. Adaptive reuse of rural heritage and regeneration projects

Adaptive reuse, defined as “the process of reusing a building or structure to give it new life through a new function,” offers sustainable, cultural, economic, and placemaking benefits (ODASA, 2014). Economically, it creates jobs, attracts investment, boosts tourism, and revitalizes local businesses (Gravagnuolo et al., 2017). Socially, it fosters community engagement, and enhances safety and services (Gravagnuolo et al., 2017). Environmentally, it reduces raw material use, lowers energy consumption, cuts waste and emissions, and supports sustainability by retaining embodied energy (Gravagnuolo et al., 2017).

Moreover, adaptive reuse preserves cultural values while promoting sustainability, optimizing resources, and generating benefits such as local investment and community integration, ultimately enhancing heritage value with lasting social and economic impact (Gravagnuolo et al., 2017). Reused heritage buildings, often considered “second-hand,” can support mixed functions shared by various users (Gravagnuolo et al., 2017). Ensuring long-term adaptability is also crucial, enabling buildings to evolve with future needs (Gravagnuolo et al., 2017). Furthermore, adaptive reuse solutions must align with stakeholders' needs and preferences, as highlighted by Sardaro et al. (2021) in their study on the conservation of historical rural buildings in Apulia. For further insights on adaptive reuse success factors, refer

to the literature review by Fatameh Vafaie et al. (2023). This research builds on these arguments and advocates for the adaptive reuse of rural heritage to drive positive rural transformations and local regeneration.

#### **4.1. Projects on rural heritage with positive outcomes in the Italian context**

This section examines three projects that offer key insights for our research on community engagement, participatory planning, and integrating environmental, cultural, and economic aspects in rural regeneration.

First, the “RURITAGE” project, funded by the EU’s Horizon 2020 program, focused on rural regeneration through heritage-led strategies, applying participatory models to rural contexts. By leveraging cultural and natural heritage, the project introduced a new model for regeneration using co-design and community-driven approaches (Conticelli et al., 2021). Central to this was the creation of “Rural Heritage Hubs” in 19 territories (including hubs in Italy), combining physical spaces and local networks to foster collaboration (Conticelli et al., 2021). Coordinators managed the hubs, ensuring engagement through activities, discussions, workshops, classes, and cultural events that promoted social integration and long-term participation (Conticelli et al., 2021). The project engaged with more than 3,500 citizens, trained hundreds in resilience practices, restored 39 buildings, improved walking and cycling routes, and organized cultural events. Beyond these outcomes, RURITAGE evolved into a broader model for sustainable development, showing how coordinated efforts can drive transformative change (Conticelli et al., 2021).

The next initiative is the “AttivAree” program, launched by the Cariplo Foundation in 2016 as an innovative effort to revitalize Italy’s rural heritage and address the challenges faced by its fragile territories (Scala, 2020). This program aimed to finance projects that enhance and

conserve cultural and natural identity, restore landscapes to boost the attractiveness of these areas, and safeguard cultural heritage threatened by neglect and degradation (Scala, 2020). AttivAree promoted social, cultural, and economic regeneration through participatory approaches, sustainable development, and strengthened urban-rural connections. Flagship sub-projects such as the “Resilient Valleys” led by the Mountain Community of Trompia Valley and Sabbia Valley focused on advancing multifunctional farming, and harmonizing heritage preservation with modern needs (Cariplo Foundation, n.d.). The program transformed rural areas into innovative hubs by promoting community involvement, ecological sustainability, and connection with urban centers.

The third initiative, from the Local Action Group Oglio Po (GAL), promoted sustainable rural development in the area between the Oglio and Po rivers as part of the 2014-2020 Local Development Plan. Supported by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and Lombardy’s Rural Development Programme, it fostered innovation, preserved local identity, and enhanced cultural and natural heritage. Two key GAL projects for rural regeneration include: a. “LANDsARE,” a project that viewed landscapes as complex systems, promoting sustainable tourism, heritage preservation, and innovative management, and b. “Destinazioni Rurali,” a project that enhanced rural tourism through stakeholder collaboration, youth engagement, and strategic communication.

Together these projects show the potential of rural areas as sustainable, innovative spaces that celebrate heritage and promote collaboration. The approaches of RURITAGE, AttivAree, LANDsARE, and Destinazioni Rurali offer useful models for adaptive reuse, sustainable tourism and community-led revitalization. Though the projects have ended, they provide key insights for shaping a long-term rural heritage regeneration strategy.

## 4.2. Successful adaptation projects of rural buildings

This section presents three adaptive reuse projects that showcase different approaches to regenerating rural heritage, and provide valuable insights for guiding potential reuse scenarios and long-term management strategies.

The first example is “Holidays in Buildings of Historic Importance,” a Swiss initiative launched in 2005 by the Swiss Heritage Society. It restores at-risk historic buildings, converting them into holiday accommodations. An online portal allows users to search for buildings by architectural style, including farmhouses, promoting their preservation (Holidays in Historic Buildings Foundation, n.d.).

The “Rebecca Farm” project is another significant example, which involved restoring two abandoned buildings for collaborative use as part of the Resilient Valleys initiative mentioned in the previous section (Scala, 2020). The project focused on restoration, landscape regeneration, and creation of a participatory management model. The restored site now includes a B&B, an educational farm with local food production workshops, and a student meeting area. It combines sustainable tourism with community-driven development and was developed in collaboration with the heritage authorities to preserve historical integrity of the building, while adapting the site for future needs (Scala, 2020).

Lastly, a large barn in Riom, Switzerland, was transformed into the Winter Theater of Origen, a cultural venue for the Origen Festival. Awarded the Wakker Prize in 2018, the project preserved the barn’s unique atmosphere while converting it into a flexible theater space. The adaptation successfully balances historical preservation with modern functionality (Constructive Alps, n.d.; Gasser, Derungs Architects, 2018).

Despite their diverse uses and locations, these projects share key elements relevant to our research, demonstrating how community

involvement, funding, sustainable rural hospitality, creativity and innovation can drive heritage regeneration and transform rural buildings into multifunctional spaces with lasting social and economic benefits.

## 5. Adaptation opportunities for the farmhouses in the North Oglio Park

The North Oglio Park spans 14,170 hectares across the Lombardy region, covering parts of the provinces of Bergamo, Brescia, and Cremona, and includes 34 municipalities. The Park is centered around the Oglio tributary, which flows from Lake Iseo near Sarnico. Since Roman times, the river has served as a boundary between Brescia and Cremona. Castles, fortresses, walled villages, and manor houses, built later, dot the riverbanks, reflecting centuries of territorial disputes. Among the communities and historic centers of each municipality, a vast agricultural plain stretch, with farmhouses located on the outskirts of the municipalities, often in close proximity with the Oglio tributary. The tributary provided irrigation for agricultural activities and water for livestock raised in the barns.

The research systematically catalogued the farmhouses, compiling index cards with their architectural and functional characteristics (Fig. 4). While sharing similarities, some features vary based on location, depending on proximity to Lake Iseo or the plains.

The study classified the farmhouses by plan typology (courtyard, single building, enclosed courtyard, or other), condition (inhabited, abandoned, semi-abandoned, or transformed), and usage (residential, agricultural, mixed, or other). The architectural assessment considers the number of floors (single-story, two-story, or multi-story) and the scale of the complex (small, medium-sized, or large). Site visits revealed that some farmhouses have been converted into agrotourism lodgings or residences, many remain in use as farmhouses, and others are abandoned.

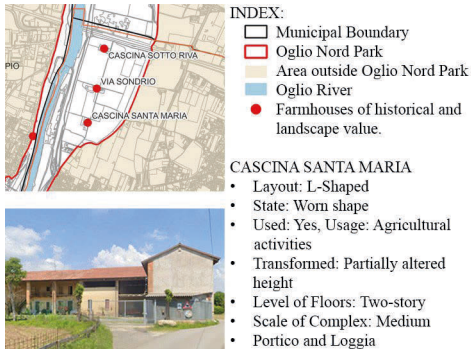


Fig. 4 – Example of a Farmhouse Index Card with a map, photo, and description (Psoma, 2025). Map created by the “Variante generale al Piano Territoriale di Coordinamento (PTC) del Parco Regionale Oglio Nord” Project Team.

The focus was to identify cases where farmhouses were revitalized through new activities. Only a few met this criterion, including Cascina Cà Del Lupo in Palazzolo (Fig. 5) near Lake Iseo, transformed into an agritourist facility, a common model in Italy that combines temporary tourist accommodations with active farms and agricultural activities. The farmhouse functions as an agrotourism facility, with a working farm and horse-riding activities. The complex is well-maintained and restored, featuring a two-story “U”-shaped layout around a courtyard. It is a medium-sized complex with features such as a “portico” and “loggia.” Located just 5 minutes from the historic centre and 1 minute from the main road, it is easily accessible by car. This example shows that farmhouses can be transformed into active small businesses, blending farming with new, profitable uses.



Fig. 5 – Cascina Cà Del Lupo, Palazzolo, Brescia, Italy (Cascina Cà Del Lupo, 2024).

## 5.1. Evaluation criteria for adaptive reuse

Based on catalogued farmhouses, reuse examples, and adaptive reuse success factors from Section 4, the research developed an initial evaluation criteria list. This list provides a baseline for developing a multicriteria evaluation and serves as a qualitative tool to guide future projects in selecting farmhouses with revitalization potential. Moreover, it can help establish guidelines for the sustainable adaptive reuse of rural buildings in similar contexts, as explored by Musso & Franco (2014). Evaluation criteria list:

1. Location and Accessibility: Proximity to infrastructure, Accessibility to the historic centre, Local facilities, Natural surroundings;
2. Building Condition and Restoration Feasibility: Structural integrity, Level of decay, Feasibility of integrating technological systems, Energy efficiency potential;
3. Typology and Usability: Size, layout, and functionality of spaces, Adaptability for new uses, Utilization of outdoor areas;
4. Stakeholder and Community Involvement: Stakeholder and investor preferences, Local community preferences and needs;
5. Energy, Resources, and Sustainability: Proximity to energy, water, and communication networks, Availability of renewable energy sources and waste management system;
6. Environmental and Cultural Impact: Preservation of heritage, Contribution to the local ecosystem and biodiversity, Opportunities for sustainable tourism, education, or cultural activities;
7. Economic and Regulatory Feasibility: Cost-benefit analysis for restoration (short- and long-term), Availability of incentives, Compliance with heritage conservation policies and local planning regulations;

8. Flexibility and Future Resilience: Adaptability for evolving needs or multifunctional uses, Integration of climate-friendly solutions and sustainable design;

## 6. Discussion

This research puts forth the vital role of community participation in adaptive reuse, alongside evaluating criteria and challenges. It also aims to show that engaging locals in planning and implementation ensures projects reflect their preferences and needs. Additionally, demonstrated that the repurposing of farmhouses in North Oglio Park can serve as a model for driving local rural regeneration and advancing ongoing projects and efforts.

The research progressed by formulating two strategies for the adaptive reuse of farmhouses, applicable at both large and small scales, each offering functional ideas that could inspire further discussion and investigation. A large-scale approach envisions creating a network of farmhouses along the Oglio tributary, each reimagined to accommodate new uses. Aligned with the existing bicycle routes within the park, selected farmhouses could function as “stopping points” offering short-term accommodation, outdoor activities, small events, and artisanal workshops. This would form an interconnected system of productive agrotourism destinations, where visitors engage with local culture, traditions, and the rural landscape, promoting sustainable ecotourism.

In contrast, the small-scale strategy focuses on the individual adaptation of farmhouses based on local community needs for communal, educational, or cultural spaces. These buildings could be repurposed for use by young people interested in cultivating land, raising animals, or sharing agricultural responsibilities. They might host weekend farmers’ markets, serve as cultural hubs for artists, or provide gathering spaces for community groups, particularly for vulnerable populations who lack access to their own

facilities. Such spaces would foster collaborative projects, workshops, and educational programs, taking place both indoors and outdoors.

These are initial concepts that require further analysis and evaluation. A multi-criterion, multi-stakeholder approach, grounded in criteria focused on the circular and sustainable reuse of cultural heritage, could provide valuable insights into the best adaptive reuse scenarios by considering the needs of owners, users, and broader social dynamics (Gravagnuolo et al., 2017).

## 7. Conclusions

This research was conducted for a specific study area, focusing on one type of rural building. However, its findings are applicable to other rural areas with similar geographic and socio-economic characteristics. The reuse of abandoned or neglected farmhouses is a valuable strategy for rural regeneration, as it not only helps revitalize communities but also preserves rural heritage. Adaptive reuse appears to be the most viable and sustainable solution for these structures, allowing them to retain their connection to the rural landscape, outdoor activities, and architectural identity, even when their original agricultural function is lost. Future research could explore a detailed proposal for a specific farmhouse and its adaptive reuse, analyzing the spatial requirements of a new program within the existing structure. This would help assess user needs, necessary adaptations to contemporary demands, and practical aspects of restoration, and reuse. Additionally, a multi-criteria evaluation of different adaptive reuse scenarios could provide further valuable insights.

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