

Community Cinemas in Italy. Guidelines to Revitalise a Widespread Network of Cultural Centres in Fragile Territories

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Abstract:

The essay starts from the results of a Politecnico di Milano Department of Architecture and Urban Studies research regarding the chances of the revitalisation of the Community Cinemas owned by Italian Catholic Church through the implementation of new technologies and the reshuffle of the internal space and functions. This valuable network consists of almost 800 projection rooms, mainly located in fragile territories (rural or suburban areas or significant metropolitan areas outskirts). These cultural and gathering centres suffered in the past the arrival of big players as the huge multiplex. Community Cinemas lost, together with the primary function of the projection room, also the role of community space used for the various typology of cultural, social and educational activities. They were, in fact, the prototype of a diffuse multipurpose cultural space. Today, considering the social and infrastructural transformation of cities due to the advancing crisis of the big suburban spaces for retail and entertainment, overwhelmed by the digital alternatives, a new typology of smarter space for the collective fruitions is possible. Multipurpose, widespread, smaller, closer to the people and their social needs. A new typology of user's need is growing, giving relevance back to these small and diffused cultural epicentres, also showing the possibility of an impact of these community cores on a larger scale as they are part of a well-organised network. In this context, the Community Cinemas own a perfect format, but they need a radical change in their physical manifestation. Four case studies have been developed with a specific focus on the use of new digital technology and new architectural devices to improve space flexibility to serve a multitude of possible local cultural initiatives. The idea of having a capillary diffusion of social and cultural space, revitalising the Community Cinemas network takes in account three main strengths: the spaces are already there, they are already part of the community, and they already have the vocation to host local cultural events.

1 The Italian “Sale della Comunità”. A cultural-centre network to be rediscovered and revitalised

There is an existing widespread network of small cinemas in Italy, located from the smallest villages to the peripheral areas of the big metropolis; it is the ACEC¹ network, which groups under its guidance a big part of the cinemas owned by the Catholic Church².

This typology of cinemas is called in Italian “Sala della Comunità”, which can be translated as Community Cinema. There are more or less 800 cinemas of this kind in Italy (Cipriani, Parrini, 2008)³. They started to appear since the beginning of the Twentieth century, usually built close to the parish churches, in the area of the oratory, thanks to the prompt understanding that the rising movies projections could be an instrument of socialisation, evangelisation and fundraising for the charity activities of the parishes. After the first period of autonomous operations, they became a stable association in 1949⁴.

According to a research commissioned by ACEC to the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano, the Community Cinemas have quite a homogeneous distribution among Italian residential areas with different sizes: 19% of them is in villages with less than 5.000 inhabitants, 25% in centres between 5.000 and 10.000 inhabitants, 17% in small towns between 10.000 and 20.000 inhabitants, 16% finds place in conurbation up to 50.000 inhabitants. The remaining lies in bigger conurbations, with 10% and 13% respectively in towns from 50.000 to 100.000 inhabitants and cities whose population is above 100.000. (Burlot, Fanchi, 2017)⁵.

The same research, which is fundamental to understand the social role of the Sale della Comunità in Italy, gives a wide range of figures about their activities and their habitual audience. The central focus is, of course, the movie projection, but many of them are also spaces for theatre, live music, dancing and other forms of community gatherings such as parties or school sessions. They reach a large part of the population divided by age: more than 90% of the Community Cinemas reach the adult audience. At the same time, approximately half of them declares to have also an under 14 years old and an over 65 years old audience. From the financial point of view, they aim to have a self-sustainable annual budget and more than 75% of them reach this goal⁶. The self-sustainability is possible partly because they are not merely a commercial business, and managers and employees are often voluntary workers from the people of the parish.

Considering their distribution and cultural activity, we can say that especially in the small centres and in the metropolitan suburbs, they provide the public function of the cultural centre and that is a crucial aspect in their possible role for the future of territories.

From the architectural point of view, it is not possible to isolate a specific typology of Community Cinema. Their size spreads from a small room inside an oratory with 40 seats to big theatres up to 600 seats; they can find place in some re-used space integrated into the general complex of the parish, or they can be separate and independent facilities purposely built as a cinema. It is also impossible to find a peculiar architectonic style or common points in the details and decorations, considering that they rose in different decades, different localities and according to the free will of the client (the parish priest) thanks to the absence of general rules or guidelines. The only common ground of the Community Cinemas is in the sole idea of their function.

¹ Acronym for “Associazione Cattolica Esercenti Cinema”.

² This typology of Cinema is always owned by the Italian Catholic Church, but often run by laical managers.

³ The complete list of the Sale della Comunità is published as an appendix, but no further specification about their current status is provided.

⁴ <https://www.sale dellacomunita.it/chi-siamo/storia-dellacec/> (last accessed 28-07-2020).

⁵ Burlot A., Fanchi M, 2017, *I Nuovi cinema Paradiso. Cultura, Territori e Sostenibilità delle Sale della Comunità*, Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 5.

⁶ Ivi, 75.

Today ACEC is facing many challenges to find one or multiple ways to respond to the pressure of new typologies of movies diffusion through the digital platforms. The situation became more complicated with the recent explosion of the global pandemic that had and still has a significant impact on the cultural activities that require a physical gathering. Despite these facts, the association is alive and well, and it recently celebrated the 70th anniversary with the participation of key people of the cinema industry, distributors, producers, politics and academics⁷. During the convention took place the presentation of a publication about the actual condition and the activities run by eleven Community Cinemas spread all around Italy, chosen as an excellent example to show the Sale della Comunità potential in defining a new typology of social centre diffused over the Italian territory⁸.

ACEC was very conscious of this potential already, and in 2017 decided to explore it asking to the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of the Politecnico di Milano to develop a research about the transformation and upgrade possibilities for their screening rooms. After the publication of the analytic research conducted by the Università Cattolica and after the considerations about facing new challenges of a mutated social and cultural scenario, the further questions were about the urban and architectural transformation required by the mutated socio-economic context. It was essential to define a new model for the Community Cinema, shifting from the romantic vision of a vintage arthouse cinema to the idea of a renewed, diffused and contemporary cultural centre.

2 The diffusion and the typology of the Italian Sale della Comunità

As previously mentioned, it was challenging to isolate a single typology of Community Cinema, making also challenging, as a consequence, to define a unique strategy of intervention. The research, considering the variety of typologies and under the guidance of ACEC, isolated four case studies (Balzarotti, Fabris, 2018)⁹ that could be fitting for the size and the general layout with the broadest possible scenarios among the 800 existing situations. The four different spaces analysed are the following: a small cinema to be created from scratch inside an under-used space of the oratory in a small settlement (Guidizzolo, Mantua, approx. 6.000 inhabitants); the revitalisation of a medium-size existing cine-theatre, abandoned for 20 years, in a separate and independent building in a 25.000 inhabitants town (Mariano Comense, Como); a small cinema still operating inside the under-used and articulated space of an oratory in the periphery of Genoa; the transformation of a large and renowned cine-theatre in the city of Bologna.

The research started with the analysis of the existing cinemas in the surrounding area of the case studies. Great interest came from the two cases in non-urban situations: Guidizzolo and Mariano Comense. Mapping the municipalities close to the case studies was an instrument to have a big picture of trends in terms of distance, presence of other theatrical activities in a determined area and their size. Still, in the end, it helped to understand the diffusion of the Community Cinema, compared to standard business cinemas and multiplex. It appeared that Community Cinemas cover a widespread portion of the territory. Near Guidizzolo there were thirteen operating projection rooms, of which seven were normal businesses and six Community Cinemas. But, if we considered just the cinemas in small towns, excluding the principal city of Mantua, the proportion switched with the predominance

⁷ The ACEC annual convention is called “SDC Days”. The 2019 edition, from the 6th to the 8th of December took place in Rome as a special edition for the 70th anniversary of the Association with a vast and prestigious panel of speakers. The event culminated with a private audience with Pope Francis at the Clementine Hall in the Vatican.

⁸ Chiarulli R., 2019, *Sale della Comunità. La Magia continua. Undici storie spettacolari*, Cantalupa (TO): Effatà Editrice.

⁹ Balzarotti R.M., Fabris L.M.F, 2018, *La Sala del Futuro. Linee Guida per la Rigenerazione delle Sale della Comunità*, Santarcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli - p.19.

of Community Cinemas five to four. The same situation was even more evident near Mariano Comense, where the operating cinemas were nineteen, of which twelve were Community Cinemas, all located in small towns while three out of seven business cinemas were in the Monza municipality, the biggest in the considered territory¹⁰.

The second part of the survey investigated the size of the same cinemas, counting both the number of screens per individual structure and the number of seats per screen. After this evaluation, another big difference from the Community Cinema emerged. While the standard businesses tend to have multiple projection screens in the same cinema, organised in smaller rooms, the ACEC associates are typically single-screen activities, even for the larger theatres up to almost six hundred seats. The choice of commercial activities to become multiplex is mainly due to financial factors; by comparing the annual revenue between different activities it appears that the higher is the number of the rooms in a single cinema, the higher are the earnings per room. As a reference, the followings are the per-screen revenues of the Italian cinemas based on the number of projection screens in 2017: single screen facilities - 76.683 euros; two to four screens - 109.775 euro; five to seven screens - 170.520 euros; more than seven screens - 243.079 euros¹¹.

The trend to reduce the number of seats per-screen can also be confirmed by the variation of the amount of screens in Italy, grouped per room capacity. In the period 2010-2014, there was a constant decrease in the number of screens between 300 and 599 seats and above 600 seats in a scenario characterised by a stable or increased total number of screens¹².

At the time of the first survey, in 2017, the standard model of the Community Cinema, often a single-screen cinema, sometimes too big, was a point of weakness. Today the size reduction persists as an issue, but the single-screen facilities market in Italy showed an encouraging increase in terms of units, audience and revenue. In 2019 the single-screen cinemas were more than half of the total structures, providing almost 1/5 of the Italian screens and scoring eleven more facilities over the previous year. Even more significant, they had the best yearly variation in audience and revenue, compared to the multi-screen facilities¹³.

It is hard to say if this trend could be the evidence of a new interest for smaller, more social and more culture-focused cinemas. Still, the single-screen cinema is far to be outdated, and the social and cultural role of the Community Cinema is a point of strength which must be the starting point for the speculations about their future and their revitalisation. The goal is to enhance their role of diffused cultural presence in the territory, which is one of the key factors for their persistency over a seventy years long history.

3 A history of resilience; how the Italian Sala della Comunità faced many challenges and the guidelines to renovate them

A small, but significant look about how the Sala della Comunità is ingrained in the Italian intangible culture can be found in the Academy-award winning film “*Nuovo Cinema Paradiso*”¹⁴, where the Community Cinema is the solid background of the entire story. The *Cinema dei Preti* (lit. Priests’

¹⁰ Ivi, 24-27.

¹¹ Source: ANICA: Yearly Report based on Cinetel data, 2018; http://www.anica.it/allegati/dati_cinema_2017.pdf (last accessed 28-07-2020).

¹² Ufficio Statistica SIAE, *Cinque anni di cinema 2010-2014*, https://www.siae.it/sites/default/files/Statistica_documentazione_CinqueAnniDiCinema2010-2014.pdf (last accessed 28-07-2020).

¹³ Source: annual report ANICA based on Cinetel data, 2020; http://www.anica.it/allegati/DATI/Box%20Office%202019_conferenza_15012020_tabelle.pdf (last accessed 28-07-2020).

¹⁴ *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso*, 1988, Written and Directed by Giuseppe Tornatore. 1989 Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film.

cinema) is mentioned by Pier Paolo Pasolini, among the landmarks that describe the built fabric of the small rural village where he spent part of his youth¹⁵. These are just examples of the presence of the Community Cinema in Italian culture.

More than one-third of the Community Cinemas run their activity since more than 40 years¹⁶, surviving a variety of challenges that the cinema business has faced along this period. These data highlight the longevity of the Community Cinema and underline the “unexpected quality” (Giraldo, 2017)¹⁷ of the resilience, intended as the contrary of a fragility, namely as the capacity to overcome adverse events by adapting themselves to the mutated context.

In chronological order, the first element to undermine the popularity of cinema projections was the diffusion of the television. Then, in the 1990s, we assisted in the rise of the multiplex: a new typology of multiple-rooms cinema. Their spread was fast among the suburbs of the metropolitan areas, integrated to the shopping mall model imported from the United States. Since then they had a quite constant audience success, and today the number of screens in a single facility persists as a significant choice driver to select the cinema¹⁸. This preference is strong among the cinema users who generally have “*one night at the movies*” as a form of entertainment itself, not related to a specific title, making their film choices directly in place.

Later, since the beginning of the 2000s, a technological leap required the shift from film projection to digital projection. The cost to purchase the new technology was substantial, particularly for many small business theatres with low annual budgets. Today the shift from analogic to digital technology projection is almost completed (Brunella, 2016)¹⁹. For the small cinemas that were able to accomplish it, a high potential of innovation came together with the digital projector technology that allowed cinema managers to have a wide range of different contents to propose to the public.

Most recently, in the last decade, we assisted in the global transformation of how we usually consume audio-visual products such as movies, TV shows and other forms of multimedia contents. This massive change, from physical to digital and capillary distribution and fruition of Medias has consequences also in the way we have been used to imagine the space for the real-life gathering to share time, for example watching a movie in a theatre. The significant change came with the diffusion of digital platforms like Netflix or Amazon Prime Video, among the most diffused. Regarding the digital platform diffusion, there is a view that the future competitors for the cinemas will lie in the various forms of spending free time in other types of social and cultural activities. In other words, the focal point of the competition has a shift from the similarity of contents (both cinemas and digital platforms diffuse audio-visual products) to the fruition modality (real-life gatherings, museums, restaurants etc.) (Stratta, 2019)²⁰. This vision, which is not excluding the impact that new forms of distribution have over the cinema market share, sounds more like an indication about how to respond to the new scenario, aiming to amplify the social and cultural features of the cinemas, which is where the resilience of the Community Cinemas plays a central role.

The resilience is just the ability that allowed the Community Cinemas to overcome the changes and continuously modify themselves, but the central question is about the causes of this ability. It is possible to identify two leading causes, closely related to each other. The first is about their social and cultural profile which is unique in the Italian cinema context (Giraldo, 2017)²¹. They are not a public

¹⁵ Pasolini P.P., 1962, *Il sogno di una cosa*, Milano: Garzanti.

¹⁶ Ibid. 5, 8.

¹⁷ Giraldo F., 2017, *Sala della Comunità e Futuro*, Cantalupa (TO): Effatà Editrice, 71.

¹⁸ Source: ISTAT report, *I cittadini e il cinema. Anni 2015-2017*, 27 agosto 2017.

¹⁹ At 2016, the percentage of digital screens in Europe was 96%, according to Media Salles that reports the figures in the annual publication of the European Cinema Journal.

²⁰ Pasquale A., 2019, *Le sale cinematografiche: combattere o convivere?* Intervista a Lionello Cerri, Andrea Occhipinti, Andrea Stratta, in AA.VV. *Bianco e Nero - Netflix e oltre*, 594-595, may-december issue, year LXXX, Edizioni Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, 139

²¹ Ibid. 17, 69.

service, and they are not a merely commercial business. The Community Cinemas are part of the Third Sector, which defines the group of private entities that place themselves between the State and the market, providing an array of cultural and social-oriented services. The peculiar vocation of being places of public utility for a community is what makes them flexible and adaptive to the changing users' needs. Their ability to be *places* was the key to survive to the multiplex appearance inside the *non-place* of the shopping malls. Their natural inclination to be *social* helped them to be different from the *socially-sterile* consumption of television products.

The second reason behind the longevity of Community Cinemas lies in their *vagueness* (Fiaschini, 2017)²². As mentioned before they are not cinemas, they are not theatres, dancing halls, exhibition spaces or conference hall, but it is possible to find all these functions in their standard programs. The cultural offer varies from case to case, and it is “*tailor-made*” for the local needs making use of the local resources.

These points of strength, together with the first territorial analysis, were one of the central aspects for the development of the guidelines born from the research commissioned by ACEC to the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of the Politecnico di Milano (Balzarotti, Fabris, 2018)²³. The publication led to give indications about an innovative functional program and architectural/technological solutions to integrate them in the “*cinema of the future*”.

Focusing on the social environment of the neighbourhood, the greater towns' periphery and the village, two possible keywords emerged to drive the process of redesign the spaces managed by ACEC: *multipurpose space* and *social aggregation*. The basis of the new cinema space for urban regeneration should be distinguished by an extensive overview of services and activities that can respond to the social needs of spending quality time together. In other words, they should help to use the existing cultural heritage and increase its value, creating a stronger sense of community, immersed in a welcoming environment equipped with specific technologies that can offer a different experience from the home-cinema alternatives.

It is possible to say that imagining the future of these spaces, necessarily means to update and enhance their deepest past. This can be considered as a strategic asset to mark their role in the urban and suburban scenario with a radical modification of their architectonic structure: a multi-directional, polycentric space, provided with multiple points of accessibility and interconnected rooms, permeable physically and symbolically, transformable to accommodate different typologies of spectacles and events. They must be visible from the outside, giving the idea of openness and creating a dialogue between the interior and the neighbourhood.

In the end, the goal of renovating a Community Cinema should overcome the idea of just making a container dedicated to the consumption of products and goods. The architectural space, the way to live in this space with other people of the community and the offered services should create a homogenous image that can be intended *as a content in itself*.

In this idea, a Community Cinema should also expand its boundaries and be the sparkle for urban regeneration processes that affect an entire neighbourhood or a small town, promoting synergies between the existing institution and social actors. This interaction can happen with the introduction of functions that are not standard or usual for a cinema. The proposal is to consider functions that should keep the space alive and active all day long, considering that the cinema alone has a very short time of usage per day and it is a service just for the people who go there purposely to watch a movie. The list of these activities is much wider (Balzarotti, Fabris, 2018)²⁴. It includes, as a reference, a long-permanence cafeteria, a small school that offers cinema-related classes and a “*neighbourhood*

²² Fiaschini F., 2017, *Elogio dell'indeterminatezza: note sul valore culturale della Sala della Comunità*, in *ibid.* 5, 95.

²³ *Ibid.* 9

²⁴ *Ibid.* 9, 34. The complete list provided by Balzarotti and Fabris is wider and includes the idea of having art galleries, temporary markets and services for the community such as analogic-to-digital conversions.

reception”, but the general indication is to develop a specific program of activities according to the local needs and resources. It is also suggested to implement new forms of media and fruition modality to face new users’ expectations. That includes videogames support to occasionally transform the cinema in an e-sports arena and providing smaller rooms equipped with VOD technologies.

4 The COVID-19 pandemic challenge and the opportunity to become a social infrastructure for the development of fragile territories.

In the first months of 2020, the world assisted (and still assists) to the most uncontrollable global pandemic of the last 100 years. The impact, from a social and economic point of view, has been hard and will probably have long-term consequences.

During the lockdown, Community Cinemas had to face a new hit that is going to test, again, their resilience. 2019 was an encouraging year in terms of audience and revenue for the Italian cinema, characterised by a significant growth after years of negative numbers²⁵. The market increase could be the sign of an imminent balance after the adaptation of the cinemas and the consolidation of the digital platforms.

In this optimistic beginning of 2020, the Covid-19 happened. In Italy (as almost everywhere with different timing) the cinemas, as the majority of cultural operators, were forced to shut down their activities for more than three months. They suffered a total loss of revenue, and after the first month of re-opening, the box-office data are not encouraging; just one-fifth of the Italian cinemas decided to restart the projections²⁶, considering the small audience and the costs to implement the new safety rules. More, there is a lack of new movies offer, caused by the forced stop also for the film production industry and by the decision of some Majors to distribute first vision movies through the digital platforms, skipping the theatrical distribution.

In this scenario of uncertainty and discouragement, some perspectives for the Community Cinemas could rise, and the critical aspect lies in their proper nature of cultural heritage diffused among the Italian territory. In the first place, the pandemic effect of the lockdown showed, like some sort of massive-scale social experiment, that the need for social interactions cannot be replaced entirely by digital surrogates. In that sense, the results of a survey conducted during the pandemic give optimistic indications. 46% of the interviewed declared that they had the intentions, after the COVID-19 pandemic, to reduce for a limited period their social activities (eating out, going to malls and cinemas). The 34% declared to have no intentions to reduce their frequentations, and 16% only stated a long-lasting interruption of the social events²⁷. All the speculations produced by the research conducted by Balzarotti and Fabris about the new concept of Community Cinema as a social centre could be consistent even in this altered context. The thesis that the physical space of the cinema is not going to be cancelled by the new distributions forms of media possibly results invigorated. The second aspect is related to some recent developments in urban and territorial planning, rose after the pandemic or immediately before. One of them is the “15-minutes city” concept, developed in Paris by Carlos Moreno, who is the consultant behind the urban policies adopted by the Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo²⁸. The 15-minutes city aims to organise the urban fabric to offer a variety of essential services characterised by the proximity to each neighbourhood. The metropolis should be planned, according to this vision, as a sort of aggregation of contiguous but autonomous villages, where

²⁵ Source: ANICA Yearly Report based on Cinetel data, 2020; http://www.anica.it/allegati/DATI/Box%20Office%202019_conferenza_1501_relazione.pdf (last accessed 28-07-2020).

²⁶ <https://www.longtake.it/news/box-office-italia-la-situazione-a-un-mese-dalla-riapertura-dei-cinema> (last accessed 28-07-2020).

²⁷ Source: Istituto Piepoli, Italy, April 13-15 2020, 502 respondents, 18 years and older.

²⁸ <https://time.com/5864707/paris-green-city/> (last accessed 28-07-2020)

schools, workplaces, gathering and cultural activities have a maximum distance of 15 minutes walking distance or by bike from the residents' homes.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the Italian firm Systematica released two reports that were going in this direction^{29 30}, mapping the city of Milan based on the 15-minutes accessibility to green areas and public spaces dividing the municipality surface into three levels of access to services: poor, intermediate and relevant. Part of the public realm mapping focused on the oratories, highlighting their role of gathering place in the Italian local culture. The listing of essential neighbourhood services also includes the cinemas, pinpointing their persisting relevance as places for the definition of cultural identity.

At the same time, Stefano Boeri, one of the most influential Italian architects, strictly bound to the metropolitan context where he developed his concepts for high-rise green building³¹ and the *urban forestation* visions, released an interview to the national press suggesting that the pandemic could become the occasion to repopulate the constellation of more than 5.800 villages sprawled over the Italian territory³².

The two visions are not contrasting each other, and they are different outputs driven by the same logic: relieve the pressure over the urban areas and create more sustainable local micro-environment, interconnected by physical and digital infrastructures. They are even consequential: *the 15-minutes city* tries to redefine the urban space as a sum of islands, overcoming the idea of the contraposition between centres and peripheries. The Boeri's proposal, supported by the new technological possibilities (such as the growing diffusion of broadband internet connection and high-speed railway lines), takes the same concept and expands its boundaries from the metropolitan to the territorial environment.

The success of this new vision for the Italian villages passes through the implementation of digital infrastructures, fiscal incentives, accessibility improvement, place branding, and territorial marketing which are all diffused instruments supported by an ample literature. Anyway, these tools are often finalised to the growth of a place attractiveness, specifically related to tourism³³. Boeri's idea plays on a different level, aiming to create the conditions to transform the scarcely inhabited villages into a real alternative to dense urban living and attracting new residents rather than occasional visitors. Fiorello Primi, President of the "*Borghi più Belli di Italia*" Association, aims to reach the same objective: "*our role is not solely to provide holiday destinations... the villages could live again only if younger generations could permanently live and work there*".³⁴

To increase this kind of human capital (Faggian & McCann, 2009)³⁵ is necessary to build also a social infrastructure (Boeri A. et al., 2017)³⁶ that can allow the re-birth of a community which participate in

²⁹ Transform Transport - Systematica, 01-06-2020, *Access to green areas and public realm: the case of Milan* <https://research.systematica.net/research/access-to-green-areas-and-public-realm-the-case-of-milan/> (last accessed 28-07-2020).

³⁰ Transform Transport - Systematica, 23-06-2020, *Living local: mapping Milan micro-centers* <https://research.systematica.net/journal/living-local-mapping-milan-micro-centers/> (last accessed 28-07-2020).

³¹ In 2014 he realized in Milan the first and award winning example of "*Bosco Verticale*" typology, followed by many others variations in different Countries.

³² Giovara B., 2020, *interview to Stefano Boeri "Via dalle città: nei vecchi borghi c'è il nostro futuro"*, in La Repubblica, April the 20th 2020.

³³ OECD, 2009, *The impact of culture on tourism*.

³⁴ Nadotti C, 2020, *I piccoli borghi rispondono a Boeri: "Lavoriamo insieme a un piano nazionale"*, in La Repubblica, April the 22nd 2020.

³⁵ Faggian A., McCann P., 2009, *Human Capital and Regional Development*. In Capello R., Nijkamp P., (Eds.), *Handbook of Regional Growth and Development Theories*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 133-151.

³⁶ Boeri A., Longo D., Gianfrate V. & Lorenzo V., 2017, *Resilient Communities. Social Infrastructures for Sustainable Growth of Urban Areas. A Case Study*, in *International Journal of Sustainable Development and Planning*, 12(2), 227-237.

the local culture, where the culture is “*a capital asset accumulated by a community whose members refer to it to connote their identity*” (Santagata, 2002)³⁷.

In the next post-pandemic fragile-territory development, the Community Cinemas network, as previously described, seems to have the requirements to play the role of the social infrastructure. And the main reason is not just in their capacity to be adaptive, to host a wide range of cultural events or their proper nature of social spaces. Such typology of cultural-centre could rise from scratch almost everywhere. Instead, the main reason lies in the fact that Community Cinemas exist already, even if they need to be profoundly updated, and they are present in the Italian villages and in the peripheries of the big cities³⁸: Two different environments that have to be rethought after the pandemic. More, they are present in the Italian intangible culture; it is not merely a matter of physical pre-existence, even if the cultural importance of a specific building can be compelling for a community. The values of a freshly created Community Cinema is still recognisable immediately as it's part of a general idea shared with the network of all the other existing similar spaces, each one characterised by its local peculiarity. In other words, the Community Cinema concept is part of the Italian cultural heritage.

4.1 Community Cinemas are part of cultural heritage. Their development in fragile territories context is more than just a leisure facility

The definition of the cultural heritage according to the Faro Convention (Council of Europe, 2005)³⁹ fits many peculiarities of the Community Cinema: *cultural heritage is a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions. It includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time.*

The compliance of the Community Cinema to this definition makes clear that it is more than a standard commercial business. It embodies the capacity of preserving the traditions and at the same time promoting forms of constant evolution, led by the community.

The dual nature of Community Cinema is not limited to the tradition/innovation dichotomy and also appears in the co-existence of national/local aspects. While analysing the eleven case studies for his publication⁴⁰, Raffaele Chiarulli was surprised by the peculiarity of each one of them. He found that there was a repetition of common patterns (the “structure” of the Community Cinema), that did not lead to homologation. Every one of the eleven communities developed those patterns with a personal point of view, generating forms of originality ingrained in the local context.

The heritage values of the Community Cinema network, defined by the Minister of Culture Dario Franceschini as “*authentic culture keepers for many Italian small communities*”⁴¹ is also in their ability to be active players in the definition of the built environment. This aspect is clear also to some business cinema that proposed to reformulate their spaces with a formula somehow similar to the Community Cinema concept, giving value to the social aspect of watching a movie as a social and shared experience.

One specific example is the recent Anteo Palazzo del Cinema in Milan, opened in 2017 following a complex refurbishment and extension of a historic multiplex in the city centre. The number of projection rooms went from four to eleven, and the main idea behind the new business was to become

³⁷ Santagata W., 2002, Cultural Districts, Property Rights and Sustainable Economic Growth, in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 26(1), 9-23.

³⁸ 65% of Community Cinemas situated in centres with more than 100.000 inhabitants are in a peripheral context. Source Ibid. 5, 74.

³⁹ Council of Europe, 2005, *Framework convention on the value of cultural heritage for society* (Faro convention).

⁴⁰ Ibid. 8

⁴¹ Franceschini D., *I cinema da salvare*, in *La Repubblica*, March the 27th 2015, 37

a cultural centre based on screenings (not limited to movies) and composed by different functions. There is a bookstore, a bar, a library dedicated to the cinema, a space for the schools, a small VOD room, a projection room, and a vast cultural program of festivals and special events. The variety of spaces and contents is the tools used to reinterpret the space of the cinema as a public space. According to Lionello Cerri, the director of the new Anteo, “*this aspect is important both from the social and the urban point of view because cities and villages live thanks to a container that resume the function of bringing people together that was proper not only of the cinemas but also of the bars and the oratories*” (Cerri, 2019)⁴².

The cultural and social values that define the Community Cinema network are followed by another positive aspect coming from its revitalisation. Rediscovering and reactivate the Community Cinema facilities in the Italian villages means, in many cases, to update and re-use existing architectures that are part of the cultural heritage. In this perspective, the re-birth of semi-abandoned local communities could also become a form a sustainable development for a country that lives the paradox of continuously losing population⁴³ and at the same time increase its soil consumption⁴⁴. The refurbishment works and the technological update have a cost that is not sustainable for many small communities without proper forms of financing.

5 Questioning about cinema financing

As already mentioned about the resilience of the Community Cinemas, the shift from analogic to digital projection was troubling for small cinemas. In that case, many public institutions decided to fund the adaptation to new technologies. As reported by the European Audiovisual Observatory (2011)⁴⁵, many European Countries, through their national or sub-national cultural institutions, adopted different measures to economically support the cinema exhibition operators. In Italy, for instance, the *Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali* (Italian Ministry of Culture) opted in 2008 for a tax credit system to cover up to 30% of the expenses for the digital transition. In the same report, there is a clear statement about the reasons to finance private actors and sustain them. If no funding is provided “*long-term consequences of non-conversion to digital projection would probably be the closure of certain kinds of cinemas, and a corresponding loss of cultural and community resources coupled with a reduction in the diversity of the film offer available to the audience*”⁴⁶, recognising to the projection rooms the cultural value in the process of building a community.

In the European context, supranational funds came from MEDIA, the European Commission sub-programme “Creative Europe” that since 1991 supports film and audio-visual industries in the European Union. In 2007 the program funded some Pilot Projects to test and develop the upcoming issues of the digital distribution and exhibition. Later, since 2009, it gave financial support for the digitalisation of the projection rooms part of their network, the Europa Cinemas.

This network is one of the principal European instruments to finance the cinema exhibitors. It was created in 1992, starting with a group of thirty cinemas which grew to become today more than 1,200. The financing support has the objective to increase the cultural diversity of projections, promoting the

⁴² Pasquale A., 2019, Le sale cinematografiche: combattere o convivere? Intervista a Lionello Cerri, Andrea Occhipinti, Andrea Stratta, in AA.VV. *Bianco e Nero - Netflix e oltre*, 594-595, may-december issue, year LXXX, Edizioni Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, 135 (Translated from the italian edition)

⁴³ ISTAT report, *Indicatori Demografici anno 2019*, February 11th 2020.

⁴⁴ SNPA report, *Consumo di suolo, dinamiche territoriali e servizi ecosistemici*, July 2020

⁴⁵ European Audiovisual Observatory, 2011, *Public funding for Films and Audiovisual Works in Europe*, 64. Available at <https://rm.coe.int/public-funding-report-2011-en-optim-pdf/16808e46dc> (last accessed 28-07-2020).

⁴⁶ Ivi, 64.

screening of European movies, with specific attention to non-national films, independent films, and Europe Cinemas Label films. Although this typology of financing is essential to sustain the cinemas' network, it is not directly related to the architectural environment of the projection room. In other words, it supports the cinemas as a necessary instrument to diffuse audio-visual contents. Still, it does not help the opening of the new spaces or the regeneration of existing but inactive cinemas. More, the financing granted by the MEDIA program supports mainly the creation of works (69.1% of the total budget), and the distribution (8,4%), while the investments for exhibitors are just the 6.1% of the total⁴⁷.

The speculative motivation of this disparity could be in the fact that film production is generally costly and needs to be financially covered much before the proceeds and this process must be continuously renovated for every new production. More, the audio-visual contents are the most important part of this industry. Without films, neither distribution nor exhibitions could exist, but the projection room, as in the case of Community Cinemas, has not just the role of receiving and exhibiting films. It is part of the cultural heritage, and specific grants for the renovation or creation of such spaces could become a useful instrument not only to promote the cinema but to strengthen the diffusion of social spaces.

A specific plan dedicated to the improvement of the physical space for the film projection was promoted in 2016 by the Italian Minister of Culture Dario Franceschini. In the text of the Law n.220/2016 to sustain the cinema industry, there was a specific chapter for the *“extraordinary plan to strengthen the projection rooms and multifunctional rooms circuit.”* In August 2017, the implementing regulations for the law 220/2016 were released. The total resources amount was €120 million, divided in a five years' plan, dedicated to the re-activation of closed cinemas, the creation of new cinemas and the modification of existing cinemas finalised to the screens number increase. The rewarding mechanism to assign the grants confirmed the interests in two main aspects previously underlined: the better diffusion in the territory and the multifunctionality, namely the capacity to create episodes of territorial regeneration. The priority for funding was for demands coming from small municipalities (under 15,000 inhabitants) without active cinemas. In case of requests exceeding the available resources, the priority was for cinemas planning to provide *“also through the participation of local institutions, an offer for cultural, multimedia and educational events that can contribute to the economic sustainability of the facility and the cultural and social development of the surrounding areas.”*⁴⁸

In 2017 the government issued the first call to assign the funds, with the intentions of renovating it for a five-year term. In 2018 Italy had new political elections, and the change of the leading parties coincided with the stop of new calls issuing, limiting an ambitious plan of public financing to the first year only.

Another form of indirect support to the cinema exhibitors come from initiatives to sustain the purchase of tickets, especially among younger generations. According to a 2017 Italian survey, 46.4% of the interviewed millennials asked for cheaper tickets as a form of incentive to go more often to the cinema, and 16.6% requested special offer for young people⁴⁹. The Italian government made something in that direction in 2016 (Renzi government) with the introduction of the *“Bonus Cultura”*, a €500 grant provided to all the 18 years old citizens. The fund allowed to purchase books and access to cultural events. The first-year spending ratio showed that more than 80% of the total funds were used to buy books, while the cinema tickets were in the third place, totalling 7.2% only of the available sums⁵⁰. Probably the question for the young generations is not about what forms of incentive

⁴⁷ Ivi, 49

⁴⁸ DPCM August the 4th 2017, art. 6(1) subparagraph e)

⁴⁹ Source: Istituto Toniolo – Osservatorio Giovani. Italy, 2017, 6.000 respondents

⁵⁰ Source: MiBACT, 2017

they would consider, but what kind of cinema space they would like to attend. From this perspective, the guidelines proposed by Balzarotti and Fabris suggested, as previously mentioned, to include innovative functions through the implementation of e-sports technologies and small on-demand rooms whose development is also part of the MEDIA program objectives for 2021-2027 period.

6 Future of the Community Cinema in a post-pandemic era. More spaces, nearer spaces, newer spaces.

In the process of reviewing the 2018 guidelines for the “*Community Cinema of the Future*” in the mutated post-pandemic scenario, many positive and some negative considerations emerged.

In the first place, the definition of redesign strategies developed for the four case studies before the pandemic, led by the two key concepts of multifunctionality and social cohesion, appears to be suitable with the post-pandemic urban and territorial visions. The new scenario revealed the necessity of a more capillary distribution of social and cultural public spaces in the urban, suburban and rural context, with a specific need of a socialisation core for the re-activation of this last. This request for diffused presence over the territories could be in part covered by revitalising the Community Cinemas that today exist in those territories, but with a limited or completely absent cultural offer. The post-pandemic is, in other words, an occasion for the widespread application of a new model of Community Cinema, renewed and ready to be the starting point for building local communities. A higher number of cinemas also means nearer cinemas. In Italy, approximately half of the population never goes to the cinema. 18.2% of them declares that the cause is in the absence of a structure close to their residency, and it is the second most popular answer⁵¹. This data is related to the traditional projection rooms but in the new formula of Community Cinema, where the film vision is just the core of a broader cultural offer, increasing the accessibility level of this typology of space is the occasion to relaunch also the cultural participation. In that sense, the renovation of Community Cinemas, after “more spaces” and “nearer spaces”, should supply the need for “newer spaces”. According to the same research previously mentioned⁵², the first motivation among people who not attend cinemas is a preference to watch the movies through the television (or, more recently, digital platforms). It is not just a problem with ticket cost or proximity. It is more of a cultural issue: the cinema of the future can't supply the sole function of “watching a movie”, where more accessible alternatives exist. It has to be transformed to offer a renovated feeling to participate in a social act.

One more consideration about the asset of post-pandemic Community Cinemas is in their proximity to the oratories. The oratories of the Italian parishes always offer outdoor areas, usually dedicated to sports and recreational activities. In the pandemic scenario, they can quickly provide external areas to host open-air cinemas.

The eventual necessity to organise outdoor events leads to the only, but crucial, adverse response to a diffused plan of revitalising Community Cinemas as social space: the developments of the pandemic from the public health point of view are unpredictable. Today it is hard to say how long the pandemic will last and if we will assist to new waves of the virus. It is also difficult to predict mutations in its transmission capacity and, as a consequence, how long the restriction to the social gathering will last, becoming a substantial obstacle to real-life social venues. The hope is, of course, to see the end of the pandemic sooner, learning precious lessons from it to develop a more sustainable environment for the future.

⁵¹ Ibid.18, 12.

⁵² Ibid.18, 12.

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