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Recovery of rural centres and “Albergo Diffuso”: a case study in Sardinia, Italy

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Abstract

The Albergo Diffuso (AD) is a typical Italian way to tourism development. The AD has been introduced in the early 1980s by the Italian Autonomous Region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia. It is a tourist accommodation management system able to deliver the services of a full hotel, by lodging clients in building units realized in existing houses diffused in mostly rural contexts and gravitating within walking distance around a main building located in the barycentre. The AD presents an horizontal framework, while traditional hotels usually show a vertical scheme, where a principal and often unique building hosts common spaces and rooms. This new kind of hospitality is based on a network of houses built within the historic centre and offers visitors the opportunity to “live the area” by taking part of the village social life, while enjoying the comfort of hotel services. Thus, AD may be conceived of as a tool to prevent depopulation of small rural towns and recover abandoned villages.

In this paper, we aim at discussing the results of the first stage of an investigation on the institutional scenario regarding rural tourism at the European and Italian regional level. We start from this premise to draw comparative elements and inspiration for the project design of an AD in Osini, Sardinia, an old rural town abandoned in 1951 because of a severe hydro-geological event.

Keywords: Rural tourism, Tourism regulation, Albergo Diffuso, Rural Centres, Recovery

1. Introduction

Since the early 1970s, rural tourism has been adopted in Southern Europe as an important strategy for reducing the depopulation of small rural undeveloped settlements, thanks to the new job opportunities that such form of tourism creates.¹ According to the OECD (2009), the Albergo Diffuso (AD) is an important example of rural tourism, which can contribute to sustainable tourism development (Confalonieri, 2011; Paniccia, 2012; Quattrocioni & Montella, 2013).

The AD, literally “scattered hotel” (Droli, 2013), has been defined with a number of denominations such as diffused hotel (Russo, Lombardi, Mangiagli, 2013), and distributed hospitality (Mandelli & La Rocca, 2006). In this study we adopt the official name albergo diffuso proposed by Dall’Ara (2010), who can be considered an authority in this field (Confalonieri, 2011).

AD is a model of rural tourism which helps to preserve the original architecture of the built environment (Battaglia & Battino, 2009). It may be used as a tool to avoid demographic decline of small rural towns (Confalonieri, 2011) and encourage contacts between tourists and locals (Vallone & Veglio, 2013). Furthermore, it may lead to tourism development in a given

¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leader2/rural-it/biblio/touris/art03.htm> [last accessed: May 2, 2014].

geographical area (Silvestrelli, 2011). An interesting aspect of such type of accommodation lies in the fact that housing is the result of the recovery of formerly abandoned rural buildings and the AD does not require further land consumption for new residential buildings, thus the environmental impacts on rural areas can be minimized.

AD is a typical Italian phenomenon (Confalonieri, 2011), while in recent years similar cases have been documented also in other European countries, like Spain.² The AD origin roots back to the early 1980s, when it was experimented for the first time as a solution to recover and rehabilitate historic buildings rendered uninhabitable by a severe earthquake that interested the northeastern Italian region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia.

With respect to this background, in this paper, we aim to provide an overview on regulations about tourism sector and on different forms of rural tourism across some European countries and the Italian regions, to assess the extent to which AD is common in the European context, and to describe a proposal for an AD for the recovery of the ancient center of Osini in Sardinia, Italy. The argument unfolds as follows. In Section 2 we present a literature review summary, an institutional analysis of tourism and AD at the European and Italian level and the first stage of a proposal of AD for the ancient center of Osini in Sardinia, Italy. In Section 3, we discuss the results obtained so far and present some concluding remarks.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Italian regulatory framework on tourism and AD

In Italy, the basic principles and tools of tourism policy are regulated by law n. 135 of 2001 (Italian Regulation, 2001) that recognizes the strategic role of tourism for economic development and cultural and social growth, and supports the strategic use of rural areas and marginal economies from a tourist perspective, in a context of integrated rural development and territorial vocation.

With respect to the national regulation concerning set of rules and tourism market, the Italian Government issued the legislative decree n. 79 of 2011, namely Code of tourism (Italian Regulation, 2011), which acknowledges AD within the cluster of hotels and other forms of accommodation. It defines the AD as characterized “by accommodation in separate buildings, close together, mainly located in historic centres and, however, placed a short distance from a central building in which reception, concierge and other related services are offered” (Italian Regulation, 2011).

Finally, Sardinia was the first Italian region in 1998 to issue a specific law (RAS, 1998), which regulates a series of accommodation including the AD. All Italian regional administrations have currently enacted regulations on AD, but not all regulations are adequate or complete.³

2.2 About the AD: a literature overview

Although AD is acknowledged as a typically Italian system to accommodate tourists, similar tourist management systems include elsewhere the gîtes ruraux in France, the pousadas in Portugal, and the paradores in Spain. In addition to the services usually offered by these systems, the AD provides standard full hotel services (Avram & Zarrilli, 2012). AD is based on a network of houses built within the historic centre of rural villages. The AD is characterized by an horizontal framework, while the main buildings of traditional hotels usually show a vertical scheme; in the barycentre of the AD's system is located the main building inside which reception and common spaces are usually realized (Dall'Ara, 2010). As a typical hotel, the AD may offer tourists a number of services like catering, customer assistance, access to Internet, and so on. According to Confalonieri (2011), it is characterized by a series of basic conditions, such as: historic buildings of a certain value, uninhabited buildings, the possibility to set a reception in a central position with respect to the rooms, and so on. The AD, if carefully

² <http://albergodiffuso.wordpress.com/2012/04/02/focus-on-albergo-diffuso/> [last accessed: May 2, 2014].

³ <http://www.albergodiffuso.com/normativa-sullalbergo-diffuso.html> [last accessed: May 2, 2014].

managed, is of some importance also in the economic, social and cultural development of a given area, and although not all villages are suitable for such a system of tourist hospitality, in Italy there is a good potential for developing AD (Paniccia, 2011).

Some other authors discuss about AD. Vallone and Veglio (2013) stress some strengths of AD such as: i) encouragement to promote contacts between tourists and resident community, and ii) elasticity, given that the AD offers a number of options from which tourist can choose (“from local products to cultural events”). Silvestrelli (2011) developed a study on AD which “shows that the enhancement of a historic village leads to tourism development, which, in turn, improves the competitiveness of its geographical area, thus generating value and sustainability for all stakeholders”. Finally, at the European level, Dropulić, Krajnović, and Ružić (2008) argue that AD is a reasonable solutions for sustainable tourism growth and Croatia can develop this form of accommodation also to improve the competitiveness of the tourist product.

2.3 Rural tourism: an institutional research perspective

In this section, we focus on the institutional scenario concerning: i) European tourism regulation, ii) prevalent types of rural tourism, and iii) Italian regional law and regulations on AD. We have analyzed from October to November 2013 the websites of some European countries (see Figure 2) concerning tourism, rural tourism, and AD.



Figure 2: Institutional analysis of rural tourism: in gray, the countries included in the study.

Results are reported in Table 1 (European countries) and 2 (Italian regions).

We considered the bodies responsible in each country for tourism policy. Tourism is often regulated by different ministerial departments. All countries selected have a specific national law on tourism management, with the exception of Germany. With respect to the forms of rural tourism, AD is developed mainly in Italy and Spain. In other countries, the AD and other accommodations characterized by an horizontal framework are not adopted. Equestrian tourism is well-developed in Spain, Portugal, and the UK, while agritourism is practiced in Italy and France. The item other types of rural tourism includes rural cycling and ecotourism.

All the Italian regions have approved laws on the AD. Sardinia was the earliest Italian region to issue in 1998 a specific law on AD, while Molise has been the last to do so in 2014. Some regions have adopted also a lower level juridical document on AD: an operative regulation concerning the implementation of the principles conveyed in the law.

Table 1: Institutional analysis of rural tourism in some European countries. A stands for AD, B for agritourism, C for equestrian tourism, D for forest tourism, and E for other types of rural tourism.

Country	Entity in charge for tourism policy	Tourism regulation	Different forms of rural tourism				
			A	B	C	D	E
France	Ministre du Redressement productif/ Ministre déléguée à l'Artisanat, au Commerce et au Tourisme	Code du tourisme		√	√	√	√
Germany	Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Arbeit	-		√	√	√	√
Italy	Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo	Legge 29 marzo 2001, n. 135 and Code of Tourism	√	√	√	√	√
Portugal	Ministro de economia e innovaçào	Decreto-Lei 141/2007		√	√	√	√
Spain	Ministero de industria, turismo y comercio - Secretaria de estrado de turismo y comercio	Real Decreto 561/2009 and regional laws	√	√	√	√	√
Switzerland	Svizzera turismo	Legge federale turismo 935.21 del 21 dicembre 1955		√	√	√	√
The UK	Minister for Sport & Equalities	Development of Tourism Act 1969		√	√	√	√

Table 2: Overview of the Italian regional laws and regulations on AD.

Region	Law	Regulations	Minimum accommodation capacity	Maximum distance from central building to accommodation (metres)	Notes
Abruzzo	22/2013	-			
Basilicata	6/2008	Regional Committee Resolution (RCR) 1274/2010	8 bedrooms	300	
Calabria	8/2008	Regulation 4/2008	2 autonomous building	300 (Euclidean distance) 400 (road distance)	
Campania	17/2001	Regulation 4/2013	2 independent buildings	300 (Euclidean distance) 400 (road distance)	
Emilia-Romagna	16/2004	RCR 916/2007	7 residential units	300 (average)	Eligible locations only in municipalities with maximum 5000 inhabitants
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	2/2002	Municipal regulations	80 bedrooms	Indicated by each municipality	AD can be an inter-municipal system
Lazio	13/2007	Regulation 16/2008	7 residential units	Not specified	Eligible locations only in historic centres with maximum 3000 inhabitants
Liguria	13/2007	Regulation 5/2007	30 bedrooms	250	
Lombardy	8/2010	-	7 rooms or apartments	400	
Marche	9/2006	RCR 479/2007	7 residential units	500	
Molise	7/2014				The first Italian region to set up an AD in rural zones
Piedmont	17/2013	-	15 bedrooms	1000	AD can be an inter-municipal system
Puglia	17/2011	Regulation 6/2012	30 bedrooms	300 (Euclidean distance) 400 (road distance)	
Sardinia	27/1998	-	Not specified	200	
Sicily	11/2013		7 residential units	300	
Tuscany	71/2013	-	30 bedrooms		
Trentino-Alto Adige (Autonomous Province of Trento)	7/2002	Provincial President Resolution 28-149/Leg./2003	4 residential units	200	AD is included in the other form of accommodation
Umbria	18/2006 and 13/2013	-		Not specified	
Valle d'Aosta	1/2011	-			
Veneto	11/2013	-	2 residential units	400	

We have compared these texts, in order to draw inspiration for the design of some basic feature of the AD. Italian regional administrations have indicated a variety of requirements

concerning the minimum accommodation capacity in different forms: eight bedrooms for Basilicata, two independent buildings for Calabria and Campania, thirty bedrooms for Liguria, Puglia and Tuscany, and so on. They also indicate a quite variable maximum distance from the central building and the rooms ranging from 200 m (for Sardinia and Trentino-Alto Adige) to 1000 m (for Piedmont). We have also noted some contextual aspects of AD design. The AD can be realized under certain circumstances, since eligible locations are limited to the municipalities with maximum 5000 inhabitants in Emilia-Romagna and in historic centres with maximum 3000 inhabitants in Lazio. In Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Piedmont, AD can extend to inter-municipal areas. Molise is the first Italian region to indicate an AD in rural zones. In the province of Trento, AD is included in the other forms of tourist accommodation.

2.4 The rural centre of Osini: a proposal of AD

Osini is a rural centre located in the historical region of Ogliastra in eastern Sardinia, a few kilometers from the sea. It has about 800 inhabitants (ISTAT, 2013) and is located about 650 meters above sea level, on a ridge with steep slope. Its historic centre is the old village abandoned after a flood, which in October 1951 caused so serious damages (see Figure 1) that it was decided to build a new urban centre a few kilometers away. Such decision was taken at the national level, with law n. 9 of 1952 (Italian Regulation, 1952), which laid down detailed rules for the transfer of all the Italian municipalities affected by a flood, including Osini. Since then, the old rural centre has not undergone any change, and is classified as historic center, according to the municipal master plan of Osini.

The realization of an AD falls in the set of eligible actions planned within the detailed plan of the Osini's historic centre, and is regulated by regional regulations concerning AD and other tourist accommodation.



Figure 1: A hypothesis of AD for Osini. A: localization of the municipality in Sardinia; B and C: images of the abandoned and ruined rural landscape and housing; D: a draft of the recovery project: lounge bar and reception (in red), restaurant (sky blue), and accommodation (blue).

In Sardinia we found that some cases of AD have been developed in the municipality of Bosa (Province of Oristano), which dates back to 1996 (Confalonieri, 2011), Orosei (Province of Nuoro), and Santu Lussurgiu (Province of Oristano).⁴ So, such experiences can be useful case studies for developing a proposal of AD for Osini.

⁴ <http://www.albergodiffuso.net/category/sardegna/> [last accessed: May 2, 2014].

3. Discussions and conclusions

In this paper, we have discussed the first outcomes regarding an investigation on i) national laws governing tourism, ii) most common forms of rural tourism in some countries of Western Europe, and iii) Italian regional regulation about AD.

Almost all countries have published laws that regulate tourism activities in various ways. National regulation is crucial, since it provides regions with a legislative framework able to address feasible policies in the field of tourism. For example, all Italian regions have specific regional laws, but only half of them has adopted specific implementation tools (regional, provincial or municipal regulations).

We have found that rural tourism is rather widespread throughout Europe in its variety of forms, such as agritourism, equestrian tourism, and forest tourism. By contrast, the AD is a phenomenon still confined to its country of origin, Italy, with the exception of some cases reported in Spain.

The rural centre of Osini, southeastern Sardinia, has the potential for setting up an AD system, given its short distance from the sea. In this case, the AD could constitute a significant solution for a sustainable tourism development. However, further studies are needed to assess the feasibility of AD successful design for Osini.

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