

The Case of Belmonte Calabro and Its Role in Crossing Cultures: A Collaborative Approach to Sustainable Development

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Abstract

This paper reviews Crossing Cultures, a design by practice research project based in Belmonte Calabro, Italy. Consisting of ethnographic action-based research, it employs an inductive and deductive approach, which has developed a model for rural revitalisation through university engagement. Since 2016, the initiative has tackled Calabria's socio-economic challenges by combining education, local involvement, and architectural practices. Students, residents, a not-for-profit organisation (NPO), and an architecture collective collaborate to address migration and depopulation through knowledge exchange and community resilience. The paper proposes a governance framework based on Communities of Practice (CoPs) to empower residents through peer learning and capacity-building. Drawing on nine years of work in Belmonte and other self-governing initiatives, the framework consists of four stages: "Rupture," "Activation of Place," "Negotiations and Communities," and "CoPs and the Government." These stages aim to foster local autonomy, accountability, and cultural integration. This paper outlines how Crossing Cultures has completed the first two stages and plans to engage public local bodies and other stakeholders to advance the final two stages. The focus is on community-led governance to achieve long-term sustainable development. This framework offers a path to enhance social sustainability, ensuring Belmonte's resilience and vitality for future generations. By empowering communities and attracting a younger, diverse population, the initiative seeks to create a replicable model for rural regeneration.

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Keywords

Crossing Cultures; depopulated villages; community resilience; governance toolkit; cross-village network

1. Introduction to Crossing Cultures

This paper demonstrates the innovative potential of *Crossing Cultures*, a design by practice research project based in Belmonte Calabro, Italy (Figure 1), as a pioneering model for rural revitalisation through university involvement. It offers an overview of the collaborative projects and workshops undertaken by the university and architecture students and presents the value of this working model to the local community. Following a brief description of the project's

history, the paper then describes where it aims to take the project, arguing that handing over the stewardship to the village as a governance initiative would ultimately secure durability and resilience for the village.

Since its inception in 2016, the interdisciplinary initiative Crossing Cultures has confronted the socio-economic challenges faced by the Calabrian region by merging education, local engagement, and architectural practices. It has contributed to “social and economic value” as observed by a member of the not-for-profit organization (NPO) Le Seppie (Joe Douglas in an interview with the authors, 2021). The project is situated in Belmonte Calabro, a village located 150 km north of Calabria’s capital, Reggio Calabria. According to the Italian Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne (SNAI), the area is one of Italy’s “ultra-remote inner areas”, defined by demographic decline and limited access to public services. Consequently, the people of Belmonte received the project with hospitality, trust, and enthusiasm, and formalised their support through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the municipality and our academic institution. Crossing Cultures has thus fostered international partnerships across universities, local municipalities, and community organisations, proving to be a vital bridge between theory and practice. This has previously been evidenced in peer-reviewed publications by the authors and endorsed by other writers (Denicke-Polcher, 2020 & 2022, Denicke-Polcher & McAllister, 2022, Williams, 2020). By engaging a diverse array of stakeholders — including students, residents, the NPO Le Seppie, the municipality of Belmonte, the Italian architecture collective Orizzontale, and refugee migrants — Crossing Cultures has addressed critical issues such as migration and depopulation while aiming to expand its impact through a network that promotes knowledge exchange, community resilience, and collaborative solutions between villages and academic institutions.

Drawing on nine years of experience working in Belmonte (from 2016 to the present) and research into other self-governing initiatives that have successfully empowered communities and enhanced their resilience, we have developed a governance framework that supports Communities of Practice (CoPs). The CoP formed in Belmonte has resulted in immediate positive outcomes and has begun to foster lasting community bonds. These bonds are well-positioned to address future social and spatial challenges (Calissano et al., 2023). Rural communities in Calabria and across Italy, as well as Europe, encounter significant challenges such as migration, shrinking populations, and deteriorating infrastructure. The lack of long-term visions and clear guidance for these areas renders them susceptible to further decline. Drawing from our experiences with the Crossing Cultures initiative, we argue that strong governance structures, which incorporate education, local participation, and practical, hands-on solutions, are vital for revitalising these regions.

This paper reflects on how greater local involvement and the equality of sharing time and skills could empower communities and academia, equipping both with practical knowledge and leadership skills for future revitalisation efforts. Our past workshops and practices, carried by the Crossing Cultures project, offer tested strategies that give insight into the concerns and how to build belonging and empowerment. We evaluated the project’s effectiveness through an embedded case study approach, grounded in ethnographic and action-based research. This involved collecting qualitative data from a range of stakeholders who took part in the project between 2019 and 2022. This methodological approach enabled a dynamic interplay between practice and theory, allowing our on-the-ground observations to inform a broader conceptual framework. It identified gaps between the aim to empower residents through peer learning and capacity-building, and achieving community-led governance and long-term rural sustainability.



Figure 1: Belmonte Calabro: Marina and Centro Storico (image: La Rivoluzione delle Seppie)

2. Practical and Critical Methods: The Importance of Village Activation - Initiating Self-governance

The following describes Crossing Cultures as a case study based on workshops that foster a cultural and sociological understanding of a condition. Supported by ethnographic action-based research conducted since 2016, we employed an inductive and deductive approach that reflects a sociological framework. This utilises theories of well-being and draws on the sociologists and political activists outlined below. Furthermore, we outline the practical methods used to animate social engagement, and in so doing, create bonds of academic and local knowledge. We observed development patterns, which were compared with other self-governed community practices. From these, we developed a critical framework that brought together the research of social practitioners working in the fields of repair and revitalisation (Krasney & Tidball, 2015) and governance (Ostrom, 2015). Together with our ground-up practical research, we were able to form a framework to test what we had observed and further speculate on how to develop the project's resilience.

Our research is grounded in a practice-based methodology that integrates ethnographic action research with theoretical frameworks in sociology, governance, and community resilience. The reciprocal relationship between theory and practice is central to our approach: theoretical models - such as Ostrom's theory of commons governance - both informed and were refined through the project's situated interventions in a Calabrian village. Rather than applying theory deductively or retrospectively, the process evolved iteratively. Initial practical engagement, e.g., open workshops, the renovation of the Casa di Belmondo, and the Studio South residency programme (discussed in more detail later), generated empirical insights that revealed patterns of interaction, governance gaps, and spatial-social needs. These observations led to the formulation of a four-stage framework, which was then tested against relevant theoretical lenses and comparable initiatives. In this sense, the research is methodologically hybrid. It synthesises deductive and inductive modes of inquiry to co-develop theory and practice. By doing so, it has produced situated knowledge that is both academically relevant and practically applicable, aiming to guide long-term governance and revitalisation strategies in similarly situated villages.

The practical research spans the years from 2016 to the present (Figure 2). The collection of data took four approaches. During the first summer workshop in 2019, we worked with the Department of Psychology at City University of London and Health Sciences at the University of Warwick, UK, on a multi-disciplinary study and collected data from three groups of participants. Twenty-five asylum seekers, locals, and students took part in in-depth interviews, which were later subjected to thematic analysis (Calissano et al., 2023). For the second time in 2021, we conducted several interviews with local inhabitants of Belmonte and "New-Makers" to capture qualitative reflections on the project's development by students who had spent a long-term onsite engagement with our first Studio South residency

(Denicke-Polcher & McAllister, 2022). Finally, the third qualitative data collection took place during the second student residency in 2022, using a multi-faceted approach. This consisted of field notes collected over eight weeks of the residency, student questionnaires at the end of the residency, and semi-structured focus groups conducted at three key points during the residency. Lastly, we conducted three interviews with key local stakeholders to strategize future revitalisation. These included Miranda Colavolpe, the third generation of the local confectionery business Colavolpe, and the ex-vice-mayor who had been instrumental in securing the MoU.

Our critical method employed a four-stage framework to reflect on the achievements, patterns, and challenges of Crossing Cultures as a model, particularly in empowering residents through peer learning and capacity-building initiatives. However, we further outline in this paper the importance of developing self-governance strategies to build belonging and long-term resilience.

The framework presented below is anticipated to serve as a blueprint for similarly situated villages facing depopulation. The stages build a hierarchical model, drawing on Abraham Maslow's work on psychological health (Maslow, 2017), Martha Nussbaum's work on Capabilities (Nussbaum, 2013), Krasny and Tidball's reflections on community activism (Krasny and Tidball, 2012), and Elinor Ostrom's work on the Commons (Ostrom, 2015). It consists of a framework of four "Stages," which reflect on the work of the above theorists. It aids in guiding understanding and offers a method of directing the CoPs devised from observations of other self-governed initiatives that feature similar forms of community engagement. The project has collected extensive action-based research related to the first two stages. We hope to develop the final stages (3 and 4) and monitor their progress in the future. In short, the four stages are:

Stage 1: We noticed a potential tear in the cultural economy during our first encounter with the village. This was challenged by the economic pressure of employment, which drew the young southern Italian population to the northern cities, and new migrants arriving on the shores.

Stage 2: We actively engaged in bringing a sense of belonging through making practices in the village.

Stage 3: We developed team building with new and existing locals to understand desires, limitations, and potentials.

Stage 4: We hoped to support an elected local council to support the existing municipal governance with community matters.

To thoroughly test our research trajectory, we plan to involve public local bodies, like regional mayors, in a roundtable discussion with the project's key stakeholders. Sharing insights from our various projects between 2016 and 2023 will enrich this discussion. The roundtable will extend the work developed in Stages 1 and 2 and serve as a platform to verify, contribute to, and initiate exploration of Stages 3 and 4 of our framework, focusing on the stewardship of local self-governance. We hope to gain insights and a broader, holistic understanding of sustainable practices and community resilience, ultimately guiding the development of CoPs and supporting cross-village networks for knowledge exchange and shared solutions. This approach aims to attract a younger demographic, including migrants, and explore co-production with universities, industries, and government to create strategies for rebuilding community resilience.

Analysis of the above and reflection on our framework has suggested coherence between practical and critical methods. Still, more work was needed to identify the following steps to reach full village activation. Outlining the four stages that focus on peer learning, capacity building, and sustainable practices, this paper provides insights into how CoPs can address the socio-economic challenges of rural regions as a closed-loop, sustainable proposition. The possibilities and difficulties we found are highlighted in the sections below, which identify the processes of negotiations and governance.

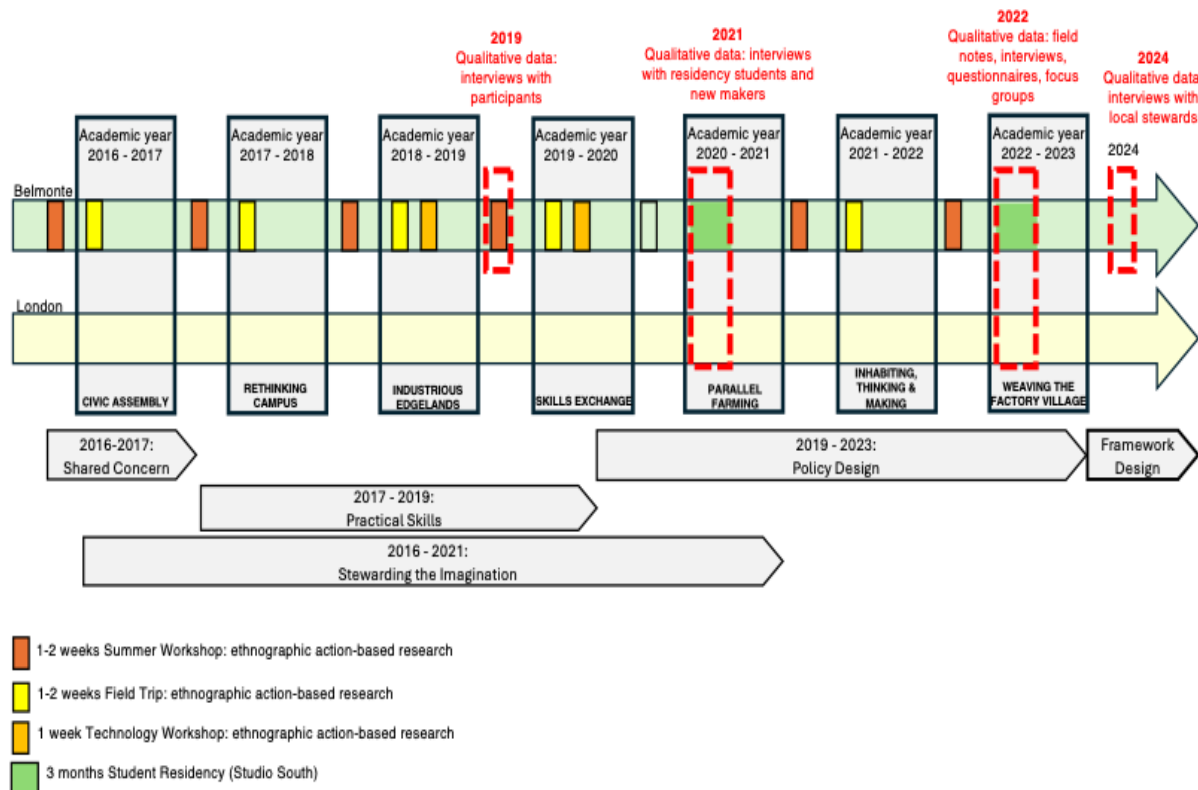


Figure 2: Project timeline with academic calendar years, onsite interventions, data collection points, and interconnected phases (diagram by the authors)

2.1. The Role of the Outsider: Travelling without Travelling

During the first two stages of our work with the Village, Luigi Provenzano, the former vice-mayor of Belmonte, played a key role in fostering collaboration between the university and the municipality, culminating in signing the MoU. This formal collaboration signalled a shift in local perception by staging it as a public event, inviting the entire village and professors from the universities of Reggio Calabria and Cosenza.

The presence of students and academics from the large city of London has profoundly impacted Belmonte and reshaped how the local community values its village. The role of the London-based university has been to introduce young people from London as “outsiders”, which sparked a renewed sense of pride and engagement among the villagers. During a student film screening held in the village’s historic centre in 2017 (Figure 3), Luigi Provenzano, vice-mayor of Belmonte at the time, emphasised the significance of the students’ interest:

“Your research, point of view, and way of thinking about this village is very important for us, because it is different from the Italian way of seeing things... The community of Belmonte would not have been able to believe and see things as they can now.”

Similarly, young architect and photographer Domenique Guglielmo noted that through students' long-term engagement, “locals have been able to travel without travelling” (Denicke-Polcher & McAllister, 2022). The student’s presence created a space for exchange and reflection, enabling villagers to see their home through new eyes, fostering a deeper connection to their heritage and a belief in the village’s potential.



Figure 3: Film screening night in Belmonte's historic village centre (image: Florian Siegel, 2017)

2.2. Establishing a Community of Practice (CoP): Growing a Collaboration over Time

Over time, the collaborative aspect of Crossing Cultures has played a crucial role in addressing the socio-spatial challenges of population decline and urban decay in Belmonte. By bringing together architecture students, locals, and recently arrived migrants who share a common concern for Belmonte's future, a Community of Practice (CoP) has developed. The participants' individual interests merged into a shared aim of revitalising Belmonte. Rooted in the dual objectives of repairing both the physical and social fabric, the CoP progressed through four interconnected phases (Figure 2). These phases have guided the project's physical and imaginative outputs and reactivated the village (Denicke-Polcher & McAllister, 2022).

The first phase (2016-2017) emphasized "a shared concern," fostering dialogue and small-scale collaborations between migrants and locals. From 2016 to 2021, the focus shifted to "stewarding the imagination," which centred on exchanging skills and ideas between students and the community, ultimately generating a new vision for Belmonte. Between 2017 and 2019, "practical skills" emerged, with participants working on construction projects that scaled up over time, including refurbishing a derelict building in the old village, the Casa di Belmondo, which later became the project's headquarters. Finally, from 2019 to 2022, the "policy design" phase materialized, with the support of local government and the expansion of the project's influence through international networks. The project around the Casa has since evolved into a model for integrating practical skills and policy within the framework of community-led development, positioning students as activist researchers.

2.3. Framing the Pedagogical Approach: Literature Selection for a Narrative Review

The pedagogical literature referenced in this paper was selected for its direct relevance to the aims, methods, and conceptual foundations of Crossing Cultures. Rather than applying a systematic literature review protocol (e.g., PRISMA), we adopted a narrative review approach guided by three key criteria: thematic relevance, contextual alignment to our setting and pedagogical model, and conceptual contribution. As Greenhalgh et al. (2018) argue, "the narrative review is not a poor cousin of the systematic review but a different and potentially complementary form of scholarship," particularly in contexts where knowledge is complex, emergent, and situated.

Specifically, we selected sources to theorise learning through participation. They address the spatial and social integration of newcomers through pedagogical design practice, support reflection on community-based, co-created, and experiential models, and contribute to building a framework for rural revitalisation through educational engagement.

Calissano et al. (2023) was selected as a core reference, offering a peer-reviewed pedagogical analysis of Crossing Cultures itself and a first-hand account of situated, iterative pedagogy rooted in action research and community co-production. Handley et al. (2006) provide a theoretical foundation for understanding learning through CoPs, which is a core framework in our proposed governance model and helps interpret the pedagogical dynamics in Belmonte. Marcher et al. (2017) offer a case study of the Italian rural context and, thus, provide a comparative lens to Crossing Cultures. Boccagni (2022) can be drawn on, as he brings a general critical perspective on the concept of “home”. Grounded in an analysis of how asylum seekers housed in reception facilities in Europe engage in home-making practices, Boccagni emphasises that ‘home’ is non-static, a process which is negotiated and constructed. This resonates with our pedagogical focus on the creation of belonging and place-making through participatory design in rural Belmonte. Williams (2020) was selected for its pedagogical framing of learning through practice, reflecting on the challenges and affordances embedded in our teaching environments, such as workshops and residencies.

We also reference our own published pedagogical reflections, which are methodologically and conceptually central to the project. These offer longitudinal insight into the evolution of our pedagogical model and, given the action research nature of the project, are essential to its iterative construction of knowledge. They acknowledge the reflexive dimension of the research, where teaching, practice, and theory are interwoven.

Taken together, the selected pedagogical literature aligns with broader discussions on CoPs, experiential learning, and integration through design. It offers a situated perspective from within the practice in Belmonte and responds directly to the project’s dual role as both research inquiry and educational experiment - forming a necessary part of the paper’s knowledge base.

2.4. Literature Review: Recounting the role of CoPs for the Local Community

Creating a CoP has played a crucial role in revitalising Belmonte Calabro, empowering participants, and reshaping the village's image. Since 2016, the workshops have provided a space for collaboration, knowledge sharing, and skill development while fostering social ties within an inclusive group. Through these interactions, the CoP in Belmonte has built social capital, enabling students, newcomers, and local community members to form new social networks over time. According to Calissano et al. (2023), these connections have fostered relationships, trust, and a sense of belonging - key elements for sustaining long-term revitalization efforts.

Further sources have been consulted to triangulate the hypothesis regarding the development of CoPs and the creation of belonging in Belmonte. Handley et al. (2006) support the finding that CoPs create social identity and belonging, along with the pedagogy associated with this social practice: “...learning is not simply about developing one’s knowledge and practice, but also involves a process of understanding who we are and in which communities of practice we belong and are accepted”.

Another initiative in Calabria, which demonstrates how joint activities and events can foster trust and connections within the community, is Camini Jungi Mundu, a small association near Riace, located 130 km northeast of Reggio Calabria. This initiative has welcomed asylum seekers to repopulate the village of Camini, leading to social integration and revitalising Camini both socially and economically (Marcher et al., 2017). In Greece, Mohandas (2018) similarly observed how small-scale architectural interventions helped asylum seekers forge a connection with a place, referring to it as ‘home’, and thus supporting the development of a sense of belonging.

There are examples of organisations in Italy that have developed along similar lines during the last ten years. One of these is La Foresta, a long-term project by the design collective Brave New Alps, which eventually led to a community building as part of the Rovereto train station in Trentino. The project seeks to unite members of local communities using action research to animate, teach, and empower stewardship. Much documentation on repairing and stewarding areas falling into work has also been developed outside Italy, such as strengthening the commons through self-governance and citizen stewardship. For example, Cooperative Conservation America (CCA), a public forum for

enhancing cooperative conservation in the United States, united people in securing local common assets after Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana (Today's News, Cooperative Conservation, 2005).

Whilst the latter was born out of extensive damage to infrastructure and thus disrupted thousands of lives, smaller, humbler projects have worked with similar principles of repair of their communities to achieve local resilience. For instance, many small local self-governed projects in the United Kingdom have developed since the latter half of the 20th century, such as city farms and community gardens, which have sought to repair the local social infrastructure through gardening and animal care (The Federation of City Farms & Community Gardens, 2020), intended for those seeking autonomy from the state while remaining part of public service infrastructure. These organizations focus on a shared approach to managing people, assets, and community concerns, and their strength comes not from their size or specific activities but from their ability to balance and manage this trilogy effectively.

Much of this thinking has been developed by political scientist Elinor Ostrom, who argued against Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons" (Hardin, 1968), which professed the depletion of shared resources if unfettered use prevailed. Ostrom argued that if there were a common interest in shared resources, then humanity would strategise cooperation (Ostrom, 2015). Some of the operational strategies we employ on the project arose from the work of Krasney and Tidball (Krasney & Tidball, 2015), with places requiring repair after disasters, such as those caused by Hurricane Katrina. The practical and critical methods of Ostrom, Krasney & Tidball have been influential in how we have perceived Belmonte's concerns and critically addressed these concerns through our framework.

Like other self-governed projects outlined above, the CoP in Belmonte has allowed locals to share their cultural heritage while embracing new ideas and practices. We see the transmission of local culture as crucial in ensuring that reactivation efforts remain sensitive to local identity and values. For instance, students expressed interest in learning local crafts like basket weaving, visibly strengthening the locals' sense of pride and belonging. Additionally, locals have learned new practices from newcomers, including during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, when students gave English classes during their three-month residency.

This co-learning process in Belmonte has allowed locals to recognise newcomers as collaborators in revitalising their community, helping them adapt more readily to change. Locals were invited to participate in a series of hands-on workshops lasting between one and two weeks. These took place in the old town during the summer months of 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021, and 2022. Although local involvement was limited, we observed some transforming from passive bystanders into active "agents of change" capable of shaping their environment. There is great potential to build on this shift, as it enables locals to take control of their village's future and fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility for their collective destiny. However, as local participation in these efforts has been sporadic, the nature of engagement between outsiders and locals needs to be more robust and clearly defined. We believe establishing clear terms of engagement earlier would have provided a continuous platform for locals to become more actively involved. Despite fostering skill development and capacity building, only a small number of locals have participated in the CoP.

In summary, establishing a CoP in Belmonte has been essential for empowering locals and revitalising the village. However, the CoP has not progressed enough to involve the local population deeply, with newcomers and students being the main participants. While it has fostered collaboration, it has missed opportunities for locals to share knowledge, preserve cultural identity, and gain new skills. Though the Crossing Cultures project continues to advocate for fragile socio-material cultures as tools for urban regeneration, it has yet to involve locals to the point of self-sustainability, as this paper further explores through the introduction of four governance stages.

3. Results: Introducing Governance Stages and Steppingstones

Reflecting on Crossing Cultures and similar initiatives, we have observed patterns emerging in how people activate space and place, and how events, motivations, negotiations, and goals converge over time. This illustrates the reciprocal influence of practice and theory. For instance, the NPO invigorated the place through their understanding

of its cultural heritage, the students enhanced it through their knowledge of construction and collaboration, and Orizzontale contributed through small construction projects and building renovation. In 2024, the vice mayor shared these insights with us, noting a period of stasis in the absence of the three aforementioned groups (Luigi Provenzano in an interview with the authors, 2024). Observing those patterns has given insights into developing a proposal for governance stepping stones within the four stages to guide the successful development and redevelopment of CoPs. The stepping stones have generated a framework formulated after analysing the qualitative data from the workshops, events, and presentations. Additionally, these are derived from other self-governance initiatives and CoPs that have worked to empower and build ethically resilient communities by drawing on the research of other notable practitioners in the field, such as Ostrom and Krasney & Tidball. In this respect, the method was developed deductively after several years of inductive work between students, locals, and migrants.

Our practice-based research methods undertaken in Belmonte Calabro over the last nine years support the first two stages of these findings. However, they also provoke ethical responses that call for the project to be locally self-governed. The outsider has recognised the conditions causing a ‘rupture’ and set the practices in motion; it is now for the village to take responsibility for the project.

The new self-governance framework weaves the individual's needs with the community's necessities over four stages. It is constructed over time and follows a pattern of scaling up, developing increasingly complex involvement in size and ambition as the project grows, where time and engagement are crucial to its positive development. In the following analysis, we have outlined the stages as themes.

4. Discussion

4.1. Stage 1: Rupture

Drawing on Krasney and Tidball's research on “Broken Places” (2015), Nussbaum's “Creating Capabilities” (2013), Kaufman's “Capabilities and Freedom” (2006) and “Capabilities and Well-Being” (Anand, Hunter & Smith, 2005), stage 1 involves mobilising people to actively engage in response to significant social or physical events that have disrupted the locality. These “ruptures” in the social or material fabric cause a tipping point and provoke community action to repair shared interests (Krasney & Tidball, 2015). They are events that affect people's basic needs, impacting where they live and causing difficulty for them to move freely. At this point, the need for change is recognised, and whilst the “disrupted” may not be capable of effecting change, change is often led by a representative or steward within the community.

In Belmonte, this rupture was identified in 2016 as a need to address two concerns, one social and one material. Italy saw an increased number of refugee migrants arriving at its southern shores. The larger neighbouring town of Amantea, located only 7 km away from Belmonte, hosted a large number of refugee migrants. At the same time, the demographic shift in Belmonte became increasingly visible. Since the 1950s, as part of Italy's post-World War II developments, the Marina of Belmonte, south of the Village, gradually became more populated. Enabled by the road and railway, it provided easy access to cities beyond Calabria: Naples, Rome, and Milan. The surrounding hill towns, thus, emptied into the coastal towns, and the flow of young Calabrians emptied into the cities of central and northern Italy to find work.

We conducted three drawing workshops with the children at the local primary school, each workshop one year apart (2016-2018). The children consistently illustrated ambitions of moving away from the village to pursue careers in the medical and legal fields, as well as the service industry. They showed little appreciation for craft or working in the local land industries, which are professions valued by the village elders. Furthermore, when we interviewed the children at the local school, we heard their desire to leave and explore professions that took them away from the village. They showed little interest in working the land or developing trades based on local skills (Figure 4). At the other end of the demographic scale, the elders had a wealth of local knowledge, cultural awareness, and skills. They

communicated this as a deep sense of place-making and belonging. If place-making were at the centre of our interests, we could see how, economically and geographically, the political hand was forcing the gap to widen between essential ingredients to success: a young, able population and a culturally rich heritage.

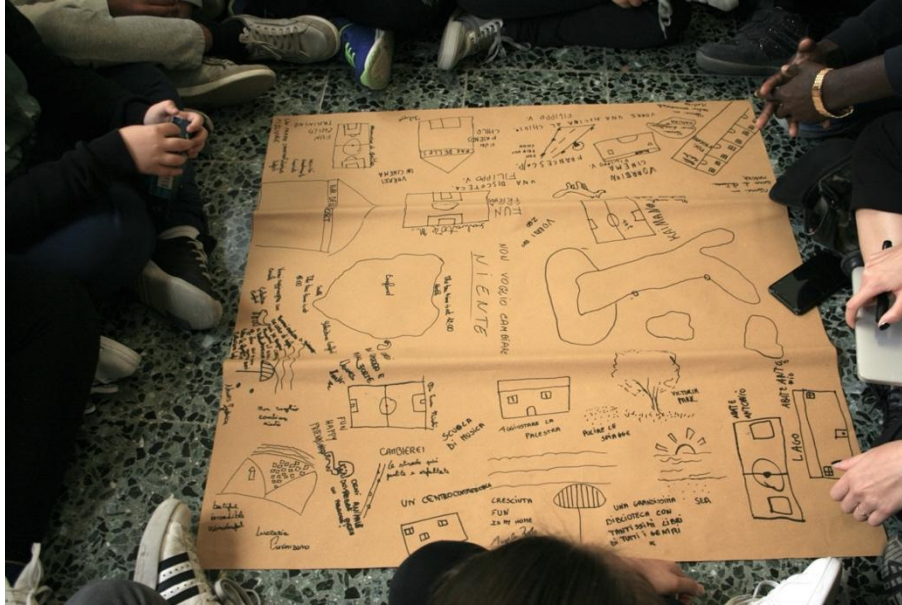


Figure 4: Workshops with students and local primary school (image: Jane McAllister, 2018)

As architects and students, we entered at this point and began, with the help of the NPO Le Seppie, who acted as stewards within the community, a program of work to understand the concerns and be available to work with the village. We were aware of the unintended power dynamics that came with our presence in the town and the new potential we brought in terms of skills, age, and connections beyond the village. Reflecting critically on this early stage of engagement laid the groundwork for the development of our methodological approach, where situated practice and lived experience informed the theoretical models we later drew on - particularly those addressing capabilities, resilience, and collective action. The challenge was to apply these advantages in a way that respected and gently supported the culturally rich environment we were engaging with. This started the process of activating the village. In the early stages of the project, somewhat driven by curiosity rather than following a structured methodology, we gained the trust of the local people over time (Williams, 2020). In hindsight, this unstructured approach bears risks, but it is also the nature of its success.

4.2. Stage 2: Activation of Place

The second stage is “Activation of Place”, also described by Krasny and Tidball (2015) and Nussbaum (2013). This comprises two stepping stones: the reimagination of memory and the creation of belonging and place-making (Nussbaum, 2013). Direct engagement with the place's history and culture creates an awareness of the new culture; together, they contribute to new placemaking. To do this, we valued the memories brought by the migrants and celebrated the deep history of the Belmonte residents. If the goal was to encourage a young, diverse population to settle and thrive, then a common shared ground needed to be found at the intersection.

In 2017, Crossing Cultures worked with the migrants for the second time, again introduced by the NPO. This time, the workshops actively allowed their skills to emerge. Students and refugee migrants made tailoring, carpentry, etc., of varying scales, which the migrants were experts on. The furniture-making activities introduced by the architecture collective Orizzontale provided conversation pieces and became material gifts for the historic village centre (Figure 5). Festivities brought locals and migrants to share cultures and food (Figure 6).



Figure 5: Furniture-making activity (image: Florian Siegel, 2017)



Figure 6: Sharing cultures and food (image: Jane McAllister, 2017)

Through making, sharing, and conversation, these activities constructed a shared history and cultural memory of local and distant places in the village. The ambition was to open and share the complexity of cultural backgrounds between new migrants arriving on the shore and those who had historically lived and worked the land in the municipality of Belmonte. Both material and social engagement with the mixed cultural background activated the place, representing the first stepping stone.

Calabria, with its Mediterranean boundary and proximity to Africa, has traditionally enjoyed the mix of cultures evidenced in its food, music, and customs, and, as such, is familiar with its neighbours' customs. The workshop, with its multiple events, had the expected effect of drawing out skills and cultural preferences as well as building an openness to each other. It produced a "multi-cultural vision of how this space could potentially operate now and in the near future" (Crossing Cultures, 2018). If home is a site of memory and meaning (Heathcote, 2012), we have successfully started to create a home at this stage.



Figure 7: The Casa after the first renovation (image: La Rivoluzione delle Seppie, 2019)



Figure 8: Communal kitchen (image: La Rivoluzione delle Seppie, 2021)

In 2019, the tangible work and creation of home grew in scale with the work on the Casa, a derelict former nunnery. This represented an essential step in developing a shared sense of belonging, equating with the second stepping stone. The incremental renovation of the building, which many in the village still remember as active from their childhood, allowed new cultural contributions that could lead to a shared identity. Orizzontale played a significant role not only as site manager over the years, but also in negotiating space and developing a unique formal language for the Casa, which can represent this shared identity (Figures 7 & 8).

The multi-disciplinary study we conducted in 2019 evidenced a sense of belonging through the hands-on work on the Casa and the act of jointly transforming it into a livable space (Calissano et al., 2023). Students and migrants noted that the permanence of the Casa – in contrast to the previously made mobile structures – heightened the feeling “to belong” beyond the duration of the workshop. They explained that there “would always be space for them to go back to, allowing Belmonte Calabro to keep on growing” (Calissano et al., 2023). At the time, a local described the integral success of the project: “They all created a big family. They stay all together without differences, they seem like a big community when they are together” (Calissano et al., 2023).

In 2020, the Casa became the place of the first student residency over three months. Though the residency occurred during the COVID lockdown, it allowed students and locals to interact more closely in the village and transform the Casa into a space with the potential to connect locals and outsiders. For example, locals visited to watch football

games jointly with the students on a large screen. In 2021, a construction workshop continued the refurbishment of the Casa, creating a new glazed courtyard (Figure 9), which was a fruitful collaboration between students and local craftsmen. The students' innovative design endeavours were met with the expertise of a local glazer and a carpenter. Working together, fresh ideas were exchanged with traditional local craft skills. Initially, such collaborations were facilitated through the NPO, but students soon made professional connections and friendships with the locals on their own terms.

Despite these successful connections between students and locals, the project lacks an extension or handover from the leadership of Le Seppie, Orizzontale, and the university, with their students, to involve the locals more continuously. One of our graduates, Joe Douglas, and several of Le Seppie's volunteers remained in the village after we had completed one of our practice-based research residencies in 2020. Joe spent three years (2020-23) in Belmonte, nurturing good relations with people in the village to develop an understanding of how the locals might assume greater strategic authorship to form a collective (Joe Douglas in an interview with the authors, 2022). However, the project and its potential have somehow stumbled on encountering "Stage 3: Negotiations and Communities". Joe mentioned that many of the locals were quite "shy" about taking a prominent role. We realised that our ambitions for the village, developing "greater strategic authorship", were far more complex than we had imagined.



Figure 9: Local craftsmen and students working together in the Casa (image: La Rivoluzione delle Seppie, 2021)

4.3. Stage 3: Negotiations and Communities

The third stage, "Negotiations and Communities", is formed by three stepping stones: establishing affordances (Gibson, 2014), negotiating concerns, and building accountabilities (Ostrom, 2015). According to Gibson and Ostrom, a community organisation reaches this stage when its identity and involvement are clarified alongside the direction of the self-governed initiative, its structure, rules, and goals. Within this, there can be provision for "nested" activities, such as workshops that provide satellite activities. Orizzontale provided one such nested activity in Belmonte; their practice in Rome has autonomy, but they brought design activities and skills to bear on and animate the project in Belmonte.

To reiterate, the project aimed to form partners between locals, Le Seppie, and our students, developing strategies for a new productive economy involving creative initiatives for the village through the socio-pedagogic engagement of young local people, students, and the migrant population. The first stepping stone, establishing the community's "affordances" (Gibson, 2014) in relation to their concerns, was partially revealed by the small projects developed over the years, such as festivals and workshops where public furniture was co-authored. Most telling, however, were

the conversations formed after the long-term residencies between students, Le Seppie, and locals, where the different collaborators began to more fully understand the context and nature of the villagers' concerns, which enabled them to articulate and, thus, form a perspective on their concerns (stepping stone 2). These conversations began to create a good understanding of the capabilities of the locals in terms of ambitions, skills, and finance.

For example, the design project by former student Jim Wyatt Gosebruch proposed a cooperative tomato processing factory for Belmonte (Figure 10). Drawing on the dispersed tomato production by the villagers, the factory would be a way of generating sustainable income for the village. Presenting his work to the villagers helped to understand their reservations about sharing traditions and family secrets, and developed a sense of how first to share and then hand over to stewards in the village to prepare the grounds for such a cooperative. On a larger scale, such an approach would enable sustained, continued development, create strategies for collaboration and empowerment to articulate concerns, and promote systems of self-governance and skilling. Ultimately, this would provide employment and settlement in the village by building accountability, which represents steppingstone three.



Figure 10: Cooperative tomato factory by student Jim Wyatt Gosebruch (image: Jim Wyatt Gosebruch, 2022)

4.4. Stage 4: Conflict Resolution and Beyond the Institution

The fourth stage is formed by four steppingstones: devise rules to guide effective negotiation, uphold accountability and monitoring, agree on sanctions if rules are violated, and devise a conflict resolution strategy.

Fundamental to this next stage of development was the renovation of the Casa to form the village headquarters as a public room and a house, as well as to share and promote good practices, confidence, and belonging for the village. For this to happen, the Casa needed to be viewed as a shared resource for and by all, thus also be the responsibility of a shared but defined body with equal partnerships, which would fulfil the first stepping stone of Stage 4. This would establish clear boundaries of involvement for the NPO, the students, and the village, and address the second stepping stone, upholding accountability and monitoring.

After the second student residency in 2022, we started discussing the need for house rules to ease living and working in the Casa during crunch times. For this to work as a shared resource, a manifesto is suggested that outlines concerns, a steering group, and a system of accountability, monitoring, and resolution. This opportunity for debate would allow congruence between the resource environment and its governance structure or rules, where decisions would be made

collectively and appropriate to each party's capability and dignity (stepping stone 3). Successful precedent projects, such as the project La Foresta mentioned above in section 2.3, should be drawn on to develop the last three stepping stones: accountability, sanctions, and conflict resolution.

For Crossing Cultures, the defined partnerships have yet to be achieved to create the project as a shared resource; instead, although cycles of positive outcomes were undoubtedly achieved, there were also cycles of dispute with few shared reference points regarding concerns, structure, rules, and goals to work with. Although much of the background research and development is in place, we argue that to optimise the project would be to build on the trust and good practices already developed between stakeholders; Revisit the village concerns and set up a framework which allows processes for negotiation and conflict resolution.

Currently, the Casa, along with its partners — the NPO, the students, and the village — has only partially developed Stage 3 and has yet to implement shared governance systems. This gap makes it difficult to fully address the internal conflicts that have emerged within the partial system. As a result, progress toward Stage 4 and the ultimate goal of achieving social-ecological resilience has been halted prematurely. While the NPO has been highly successful in increasing visibility and developing strategies for community practices, the project's premise should empower the village to achieve autonomy, resilience, and scale-up. There are reports from the village expressing a willingness to advance the project to the next stage. To accomplish this, we argue that shared governance must be established, and common resources clearly defined and defended.

5. Conclusions

Since 2016, the architecture initiative Crossing Cultures has showcased how universities can redefine architectural practice in the Mediterranean Region. By being embedded in a specific location and returning year after year, the university has played a key role in the regeneration of the depopulated village of Belmonte. By bringing students and attracting other newcomers to this region – itself a historically significant cultural crossroads – Crossing Cultures has pioneered a replicable new model of collaboration and sustainable development for rural areas.

In an interview in 2021 (Denicke-Polcher & McAllister, 2022), Luigi Provenzano spoke about the success of Crossing Cultures and his vision for creating a network of villages in the region:

“The presence of students in Belmonte has reshaped the image of our village, not only in Calabria but nationally. Other municipalities have contacted me, recognizing that this experience could breathe new life into abandoned villages. If replicated in other parts of the region, this could revitalize culture, study, and research in the South.”

Luigi further emphasized Calabria's unique characteristics; its scattered infrastructure, consisting mostly of villages, with few towns or cities. He saw the integration of students living amongst the local population, alongside new technologies enabling remote work, as a model for sustaining underpopulated areas.

Our collaboration with the municipality of Belmonte Calabro, the local NPO Le Seppie, the architecture collective Orizzontale, and numerous local contributors has been instrumental in creating a CoP. This collective effort, built on shared ambitions, has reactivated the region by drawing on its rich history, unique biodiversity, and complex socio-economic landscape. Every participant has been recognised as essential to the project's success.

Over time, this collaborative process has fostered trust, both within the group and with the local community. The scale of the tangible outputs - from furniture to a room, a building, and a public square - has grown, as has the duration of the student engagement. In 2016, students visited Belmonte twice for a field trip and summer workshop. By 2020, a student residency was developed, extending the presence of students in the village to three months and further contributing to the village's revitalisation. In this context, architectural education became a powerful tool for transforming a depopulated village situated in one of Italy's “ultra-remote inner areas”. It allowed for the recognition, research, and analysis of the “rupture”, identified in Stage 1, ultimately leading to the “Activation of Place” through architectural and ethnographic practice in Stage 2. However, to fully understand the impact of placemaking in

activating the village, we look towards the following stages of empowerment: testing the powers of negotiation, feedback loops, and conflict resolution, whereby the villagers assume the role of Stages 3 and 4.

With this paper, we want to demonstrate that long-term success and sustainable engagement require a governance framework that secures local participation and fosters a sense of ownership. The proposed governance model, based on the key principles of four stages, offers a structure for further analysis and refinement through real-world testing. The recent interview with Miranda Colavolpe and Luigi Provenzano (interview with the authors, 2024) allowed us to state our position and request solidarity with the next stage. It confirmed their enthusiasm for us to continue the project, collectively develop the next stage, and help source locals to take an active role in its governance.

“We can think about [who the local stewards are], but we need some time to effectively understand who the stakeholders could be and how they associate with the village as groups of ‘nested project’.”

The questions arising from the above interview included whether forming a network could aid social and economic resilience, which existing places in Belmonte already offer people economic, social, and educational support, and if there are existing people who could act as representatives of each enterprise. Our graduate Joe Douglas, who we consider a “steward”, presented these questions to members of the village, contextualising them in their own practices as a starting point.

Next, we will return to Calabria to invite key stakeholders to a roundtable for feedback from collaborators, local representatives, academics, and public local bodies, including mayors of nearby villages. This aims to validate and refine our governance strategy, creating a toolkit to empower other villages. While we have partnered with stakeholders committed to the village’s growth, we want to inspire them to become stewards who facilitate collaboration among all parties.

To enhance local governance, we plan to further promote consolidation and networking among small enterprises in the village, which we have termed “resilient”. Here, we have observed two successful approaches: The first operates geographically at the edge of the village, providing visibility and industry through effective governance practices, mentoring, and employment, such as the Colavolpe factory. Their approach takes the form of “industry outreach”, fostering networks within the village and beyond through employment, outreach, purchase of ingredients, and sales. The second approach involves conviviality, family skills, and connections, exemplified by the Antico Café Murano and its family members. This promotes networking within the village through familial skills and friendliness, and, especially for newcomers, serves as the physical and social gateway to the village. Both models enhance the village’s resilience, and their interrelationship encompasses all four framework stages outlined above. In this context, our initial task will be to identify other initiatives characterised by “industry outreach” and “social gateway”, along with the stakeholders leading them. Subsequently, we must engage these stakeholders to assume the role of stewards and caretakers of Belmonte as an enterprise.

Ultimately, the aim is to test the proposed governance model and its role in bridging cultures in similarly situated villages. As Luigi Provenzano reflected, expanding our framework to other villages in this region could be a meaningful step towards “revitalising culture, study, and research in the South.”

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declare that there is no competing interest.

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