

A consideration about cultural districts in Italy

The valorisation of cultural heritage is identified by the sector's recent policies as a potential source of economic growth and innovation: the current EU guidelines also bestow considerable importance on the territorial, cultural and environmental resources and their ability to influence local development, pushing towards the implementation of cross-sector plans.

The need to move from strategies programmed to promote the internal evolution of the cultural assets' sector to strategies where the valorisation of cultural resources located in a specific site starts the embed processes' development of the entire local system, it suggests the launch of district models' intervention based on cultural heritage. Such model is favoured by the distinguishing and unique characteristics of the Italian system where cultural assets and activities have a strong relationship with the area in terms of both material and immaterial.

So the concept of cultural district was born as an organized and integrated system of new generation, territorially delimited, whose premise is characterised by a high concentration of cultural assets and activities and the integration of the valorisation's process of the cultural and environmental resources, both material and immaterial, with the infrastructures' system, related productive sectors in order to ensure economic growth and autonomy of the district.

It is logical to underline the importance of the economic value of such shares clash with the retrograde conception of cultural assets' exploitation or economic logic's prevarication on the cultural nature of the asset.

Why reject the idea that, in addition to the public service done to ensure the usability of the cultural heritage, there are a number of services of economic nature (and therefore economically productive) that can coexist with it and that, indeed, improve the usability of the assets by the public and provide an integrated process of self-enhancement?

The cultural district is inspired by the concept of Marshall's industrial district and it becomes a new evolved frontier of strategic planning in the area, where however the key factor is the culture that – thanks to its strong power of identification – becomes a moment of social, cultural and economic aggregation. Consequently, the cultural district is identified as the place where the cultural and landscape resources and the territory's know-how (localized knowledge) – interacting with the services, typical productive activities, infrastructures and touristic organizations – become important factors in the development of the entire local economy, through cultural quality tourism and the production of goods based on the local resources and on its look, therefore, difficult to be recreated elsewhere. Despite the culture's generally universal feature, the districts are characterized by the locality and peculiarity of their constituent elements (assets, activities, knowledge, resources, productivity, etc.).

The cultural district can provide a true cultural, social, economic and touristic revival of entire areas giving to cultural heritage the function of driving force for the economic growth of linked industry if culturally programmed and territorially planned. The links between investments in cultural policies, development factors and urban regeneration are socio-economic conditions necessary to ensure one of the fundamental requirements of the advanced district: the productivity and the guarantee of economic autonomy.

In fact, the cultural district revolve not only around the material capital but it is also based on a wide variety of activities related to the cultural driven from which the concept of intangible economy is originated: communication, spread of knowledge, interrelationship, processes of identification and belonging, services that characterise a specific area guaranteeing the uniqueness and the individuality.

The union of shared aims in a specific site starts a process of transformation of the area allowing a growth and a spread of local knowledge. Therefore the cultural district is aimed not only at increasing tourism demand but it starts a process of cultural, social and economic localized development producing new needs in pre-existing community and generating new economy and culture. The territorial identification of an asset or a specific cultural value with the area of origin must not coincide necessarily with existing administrative divisions (regions, provinces, municipalities, etc.) but should aim to recognize the uniqueness of the area trying to go beyond trivial directional contrasts in order to find common purposes and a good collaboration underlining characteristic features of the territory in the broadest sense.

In conclusion, thanks to the cultural districts, we can say it has been possible to start and support increasing processes in order to: program the valorisation of the cultural heritage in a long period, integrate the cultural supply chains with the local economic resources and create a system of management and the development of the activities shared by the main stakeholders.

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