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Recognising landscape transformations: a minor historic centre as a palimpsest to investigate for enhancement strategies

Reflection on the built landscape, as a stratified palimpsest in which natural, anthropic and cultural elements are interwoven, represents an essential key to interpreting the historical, social and environmental dynamics that shape territories. Within this framework, small historic centres offer a privileged test-bed for investigating the interaction between the natural environment, the built fabric and the daily life of communities, revealing sensitive balances and relations that have settled over time and are now often undermine by increasingly rapid transformations.
The paper describes a research developed within the iNEST (Interconnected Nord-Est Innovation Ecosystem) project, focusing on the historic centre of Piazzola sul Brenta, in the Veneto landscape, as an exemplary case of integrated reading of the built landscape. The centre, known for the monumental presence of Villa Contarini but also for a minor urban fabric rich in memory and stratifications, is analysed as an expression of the continuous dialogue between natural and artificial elements, with particular attention to the relationship between settlement forms and territorial transformations.
Combining data on community's perception and integrated surveying methodologies, a three-dimensional virtual space is modeled, integrating in one tool quantitative and qualitative information. The research approach - based on an integrated reading of the territory, historical knowledge, direct observation and community involvement - is therefore intended to offer a methodology that can also be replicated in other similar contexts, promoting multidisciplinary and analysis of historical traces as key for future actions.

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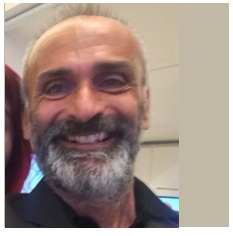

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Keywords:
Minor Historic Centre; representation; Historical Landscapes; Urban digitization; Integrated survey; Piazzola sul Brenta

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INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by increasingly rapid and continuous environmental and social transformations (Feroz et al., 2021), the need to rethink how we understand and safeguard the built landscape has become urgent, particularly for small historic centres, whose fragile balance between architecture, landscape, and community memory is often at risk of loss. The urgency of environmental challenges – including those posed by climate change – has brought issues such as risk mitigation, post-disaster recovery, participatory governance, and the development of monitoring tools to the forefront of the preservation of historic built heritage (Fatorić, Seekamp, 2017; ICOMOS, 2019). Within this context, the capacity to model and understand the landscape – both built and natural – has become essential not only for conservation strategies but also for anticipating and managing future risks, especially within the Architecture, Engineering, and Construction (AEC) sectors (Zancheti et al., 2020), where a lack of integrated risk management can compromise heritage conservation goals and significantly impact land-use decisions, ultimately shaping how cities and territories evolve over time.
In this framework, the documentation of the landscape – conceived as a dynamic system of natural and anthropogenic components – is not merely an act of preservation, but a critical tool for generating knowledge. It enables a deeper comprehension of historical layers, settlement patterns, and cultural significance, thereby supporting more informed planning, protection, and enhancement efforts (Letellier, 2007; Fregonese, 2018). As such, documenting the built environment becomes a foundational step in any strategy aimed at sustaining the identity and resilience of places facing the pressures of contemporary transformation.
Within the field of documentation, traditional tools for spatial analysis and heritage management may prove insufficient on their own, as they frequently overlook the intangible dimensions that make a place meaningful and distinctive for its inhabitants, opening an opportunity to develop new strategies of analysis of the space we live. To address these complexities, it is essential to adopt new, integrated methodologies capable of capturing both the material and immaterial aspects, which includes not only the physical structures and settlement forms but also the lived experiences, perceptions, and local knowledge that contribute to shaping a community's identity (Nogué, Wilbrand, 2018; Taylor, 2009). Recognising and analysing these dimensions is crucial for developing sustainable strategies of conservation, enhancement, and reuse that are grounded in the cultural values of the territory (UNESCO, 2011).
For this reason, the built landscape must be understood as a layered palimpsest, a living synthesis of natural and anthropic forces, shaped over time by both conscious interventions and spontaneous adaptations (Clementi, 2002), where small historic centres, often characterised by centuries of layered transformations, offer a privileged point from which to explore the interaction between place, memory and indiviadual. In this research minor historic centres are analysed not only for their architectural heritage value, but also in their symbolic dimensions of place identity and collective memory: the built environment, which we analysed and measured, operates as a cultural text through which values, traditions, and shared meanings are transmitted across generations. Particularly within the Italian context, different research has

Fig. 1 - Aerial image, processed by Photomerge: Piazzola sul Brenta, portion of the roofs of the urban agglomeration which links the colonnade around the Piazza Camerini and the former Loco delle Vergini (graphic elaboration by the authors).

Fig. 2 - Aerial image from the survey campaign: view from the garden at the back of Villa Contarini-Camerini and perspective on Viale Camerini, which was designed to connect the Villa directly to Padua. Image by the authors.

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been devoted to the conservation and valorisation of small historic settlements, often integrated with interdisciplinary analyses (Sacchetti et al. 2023), concerning also place perception (Bianconi et al. 2021). The research's highly interdisciplinary nature benefits from collaboration with other departments within the University of Padua, recognising the great value of interaction between different fields, and it also benefits from previous studies regarding digital storytelling of intangible heritage (Amoruso, 2024) and the urban and landscape identity of small historic centres (Arena, 2023).
New technologies certainly support this interdisciplinary approach, as they are capable of storing a wide range of data in a single digital file: urban, architectural, social, cultural, historical, etc. However, this research is not limited to the use of new technologies as databases, even though this element is of fundamental importance. The main intention is to explore new digital and analogue representations of the complex historical space of these smaller centres, in order to offer a tool for analysis and observation, for administrations and citizens, that takes into account both tangible and intangible, invisible aspects. The morphological metric survey is therefore used as a solid basis on which to overlap intangible data.

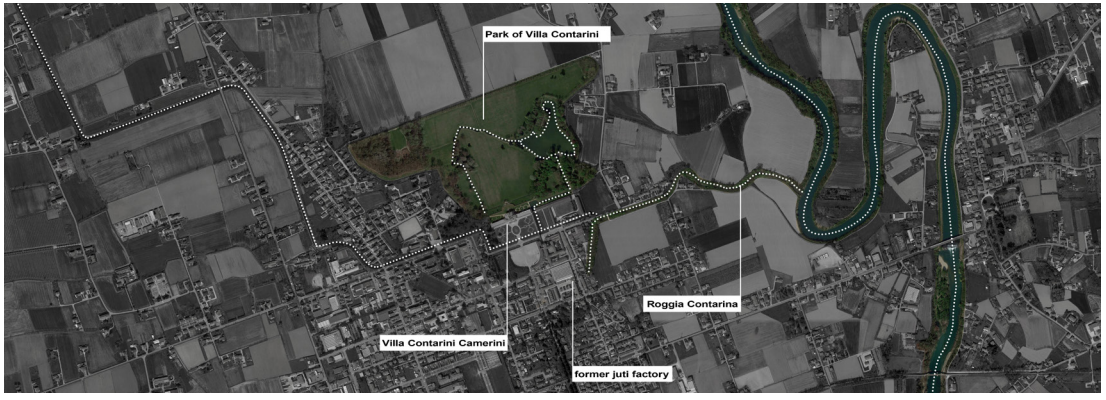

Fig. 3 - The city's interaction with the Brenta River (on the left) is emphasised by the route of the Roggia Contarina. Graphic elaboration by the authors.

Fig. 4 - The relation of the city with the water course: the former juty factory (left), the moat in front of the Villa (right). Images by the authors.

READING NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL LANDSCAPES: PROJECT CONTEXT

Understanding and safeguarding cultural landscapes (UNESCO, 2008) – especially in the face of accelerating environmental, social, and spatial changes – requires integrated approaches that acknowledge the complex relationships between ecological systems, human settlements, and cultural memory. This paper presents a case study developed within the iNEST (Interconnected Nord-Est Innovation Ecosystem) project, highlighting a research addressing not only the material configuration of landscapes but also the symbolic, perception, and experiential dimensions that contribute to the construction of local identity (Ingold, 2000; Tuan, 1977). Framed in the contest of the Spoke 4 concerning "City, Architecture and Sustainable Design", the project develops within the lead of the Department of General Psychology of Padua through the Research Topic number 3.1 "The interaction between individuals and their environment", aiming to develop an analysis of the physical and perceived space, understanding the effect on citizens of a place with mixture of natural element (green and blue) and architectural cultural heritage.
While there is broad consensus within the scientific community regarding the positive impact of natural environments on human health and psy-

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chophysical well-being (Ulrich et al., 1991; Stevenson et al., 2018), comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding the effects of hybrid spaces – those shaped by a combination of natural features and historical architectural elements. These complex environments, where ecological and cultural values intersect, offer unique opportunities for deepening our understanding of place and identity. Small historical centres, often neglected from a tourist point of view compared to the more attractive destinations, and often excluded from investments, renewal and transformation processes, are, on the other hand, custodians of ancient testimonies unchanged over time (Maietti, 2023).

These minor centres offer valuable contexts for investigating the persistent interactions between built and natural environment and for this reason the research chose as primary case study the historic centre of Piazzola sul Brenta.

Located in the Veneto region and mostly known for its monumental Villa Contarini, the town is equally defined by a minor built fabric rich in memory and historical layering, in deep connection with the surrounding landscape. The spatial and historical configuration of the settlement reflects a continuous negotiation between anthropic and natural elements, embedded within a landscape that carries centuries of social and cultural stratification, consistent with the concept of the Palladian landscape, understood as a territorially and ideologically constructed space, shaped by values of order, power, and harmony with nature (Cosgrove, 1993). The landscape in and around Piazzola sul Brenta thus emerges not simply as a physical setting but as a cultural text – an outcome of long-term interactions between human agency and environmental context. Such layered landscapes are essential to understanding how heritage is not only preserved but lived, experienced, and reinterpreted across time. Recognising their value involves the ability to document and analyse both tangible and intangible elements as expressions of collective memory and identity. Recent empirical studies further highlight the importance of perceived place qualities and their impact on well-being and restorative experiences, reinforcing the role of heritage and green spaces in fostering psychological and cognitive benefits (Gallou et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2021). Piazzola sul Brenta is characterised by a deep historical stratification that has developed over the years and reached its greater development under the leadership of the Contarini family. In fact, between the 16th and 17th centuries, the urban landscape, like the natural landscape, underwent major changes: the villa was enlarged and decorated, the village and square were renovated, and the Brenta water network was diverted. A second period of great interest in which to analyse the relationship between the natural and the artificial is that of industrial Piazzola, when the Camerini family transformed the town (road network, public spaces, jute factory) from a simple agricultural village into a modern industrial and urban centre. The case of Piazzola sul Brenta provides a relevant model for exploring how advanced documentation techniques, community engagement, and historical analysis can be combined into a methodology that reads the landscape as a dynamic cultural construct to develop an integrated approach of sustainable and context-aware strategies for the preservation and enhancement of small historic centres (Montanari et al., 2023).

Fig. 5 - Aerial image from the survey campaign, illustrating the dialogue between natural and artificial landscapes. The image shows Piazza Camerini with its C-shaped portico, the Villa Contarini complex located in front of it, and the natural landscape surrounding Piazzola sul Brenta. Image by the authors.

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METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The interdisciplinary context in which this research takes place is a leading element which has designed the approach and methodology of the work from the very beginning.
Seeking at first the historical traces on the historical and contemporary maps and documents available, the initial phase of the research focused on a historical-cartographic investigation aimed at reconstructing the evolution of the landscape over time, considering both natural processes and human interventions. This involved the analysis and georeferencing of a series of historical maps, allowing for direct comparison with contemporary cartographic datasets and spatial information. The overlay of past and present maps revealed key changes in the territory, highlighting the dynamic interplay between environmental transformation and anthropogenic reshaping. Historical mapping, as emphasised in the critical cartographic literature (Harley, 1989; Rumsey and Punt, 2018), plays a dual role: while serving as a technical tool for spatial documentation, it also functions as a medium for conveying and interpreting cultural narratives and power structures embedded in the landscape. In line with this perspective, one of the primary aims of the cartographic analysis, developed in collaboration with the Department of Cultural Heritage of Padua, was to understand how the interaction between built structures and natural systems has shifted over time in Piazzola sul Brenta. A particular focus was placed on the bed of the Brenta River and the Villa Camerini-Contarini complex, both central elements in the historical morphology of the area. The research drew upon archival sources of historical maps, some of which were commissioned by the Contarini family and sent to the Provveditori sopra Beni Inculti in 1556 to have permission for a river deviation (Roggia Contarina), promoting their agricultural use (and later industrial). But the water from this diversion did not have just a functional purpose, but also a recreational one: in part, in fact, the water was also used to fill the artificial lake located in the magnificent garden at the back of the Villa,

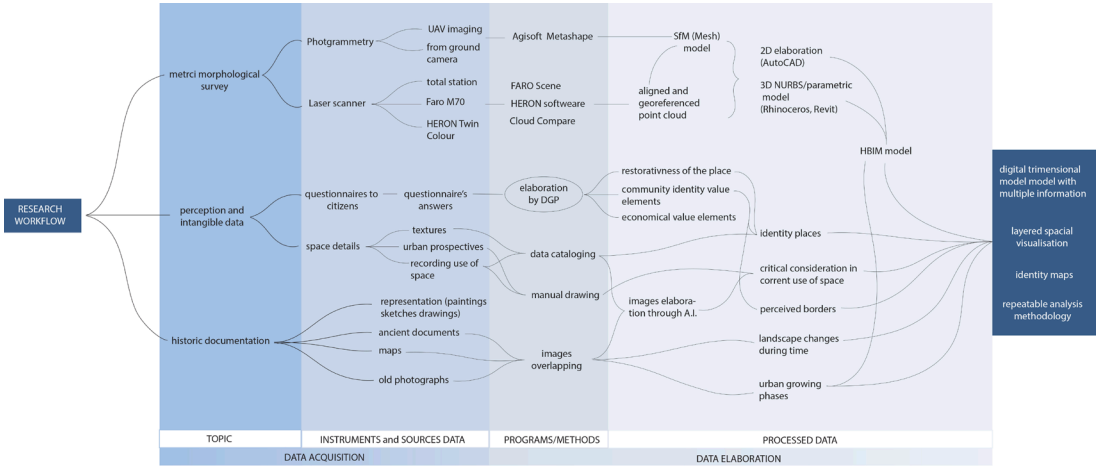

Fig. 6 - Workflow diagram showing how the morphological survey fits into a broader study, in collaboration with other departments of the University of Padua within the iNest project. Elaboration by the authors.

in part for the fishmongers, in part for the moat surrounding the Villa, where magnificent shows of naumachie were staged to entertain the guests of the Contarini family (Piccioli, 1685).
The second phase of the research was carried on through a dual campaign of data acquisition: one focused on metric and morphological surveys for the detailed documentation of the built environment and the other developed by the Department of General Psychology through citizen questionnaires [Miola et al. 2024], aimed at collecting perceptual and emotional responses to urban and landscape spaces. By targeting a diverse and representative sample of the population (211 residents in Piazzola sul Brenta, between the ages of 18 and 77) took part in the study, answering questions to determine residential satisfaction and the restorativeness of the place. With regard to the metric and morphological survey, all stages of the data acquisition process—from the selection of instruments to the definition of the operational workflow—were specifically designed to address the dual objectives of the study: documenting the

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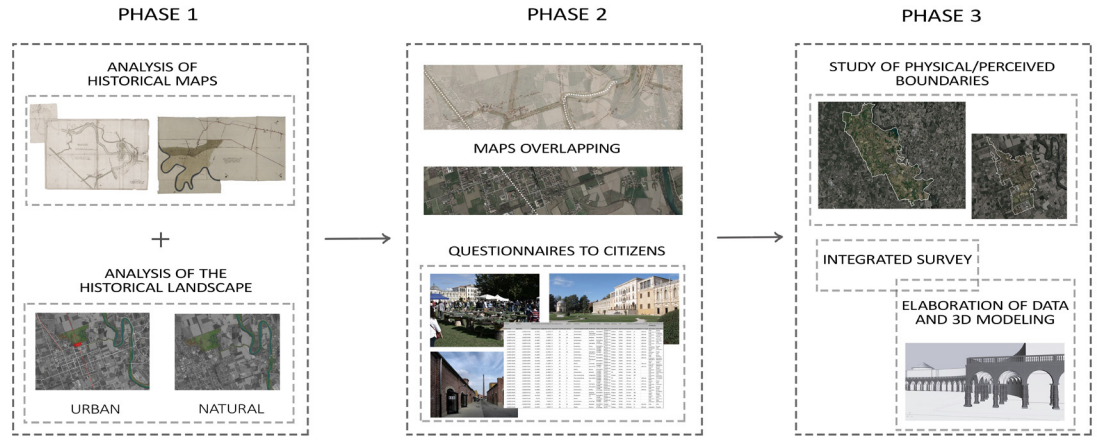

Fig.7 - Above, methodological scheme of the research. Graphic elaboration by the authors.

Fig. 8 - Below, the equipment used during the survey in Piazzola sul Brenta. Images by the authors.

geometric memory of the site and examining the relationship between individuals and their spatial context. To meet these aims, the survey integrated both static and mobile laser scanning technologies. In particular, a Faro Focus M70 terrestrial laser scanner was used to obtain high-precision reference data, while a Heron MS Twin Color mobile mapping system was employed for its capacity to reproduce a human-centred viewpoint, as the backpack-mounted device records data from the perspective of a person moving through the urban fabric. Acknowledging the benefits of an integrated survey approach, additional data were acquired through aerial photogrammetry (via drone) and ground-based photogrammetry (using a digital single-lens reflex camera). Through an integrated survey campaign, the geometric memory of the city was documented, merging the use of drone and terrestrial tools, to map a large area of the city, focusing on the square Contarini in front of the Villa, the area around the Villa, its garden, the complex around the former jute factory the historical urban complex around the square, which once hosted the Loco delle Vergini (a place of education in music, theatre and embroidery for young orphans girls and an integral part of citizens life in the Villa).

RESULTS

In the research presented, the historical urban context of this minor centre is analysed by integrating conventional survey methodology and data acquisition related to spatial perception and the stratification of the historical landscape. In this lived historical urban space, residents are not considered merely passive subjects, but active contributors to the changes of the city and construction of its meaning.
Starting through the analysis of significant historical maps and their georeferenced superimposition onto current satellite imagery, the study identified a substantial shift in the Brenta River's course. The comparison of those historical documents also revealed the shift of the urban grid, consequently at the design changes of

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the Villa Contarini, leaving the old asset given by the Roman axes and redesigning an urban pattern which emphasises the importance of this historical monument in the city life and in the territory. The mapping and identification of the deviation of the Brenta River remain elements of great interest because they highlight the use of natural local resources in relation to the historic centre and the cultural and economic functions of the various centuries. Regarding the survey campaign, the integration of static and mobile laser scanning technologies proved particularly effective in analysing the perceptual experience of space, as it enabled a direct correspondence between the operator's trajectory and the viewpoint of an inhabitant moving through the urban environment of Piazzola sul Brenta. This combined approach produced a dense and multifaceted dataset composed of point clouds enriched by information of a continuous record of the operator's movement across the urban fabric and by the photogrammetry process, adding with chromatic and materials details. The photogrammetric datasets were georeferenced using coordinates derived from the laser scanning point clouds, thereby ensuring the spatial alignment and metric consistency of all data sources. The integrated datasets were then processed using photogrammetric modelling software (Agisoft Metashape) to generate high-resolution, textured 3D models that offer a multi-layered and metrically precise digital reconstruction of the study area—serving as a valuable tool for both future analytical purposes and interactive visualisation. The three-dimensional mesh model is then elaborated using the Rhinoceros program to construct the main surfaces in NURBS, in order to obtain a "clean" and precise geometric model. Part of this three-dimensional model is detailed parametrically using the BIM program Revit.
The questionnaires of the Department of General Psychology were specifically developed to obtain information regarding residential satisfaction, restorativeness of the place and the degree of affective attachment toward particular urban areas. Regarding this latter information, data gathered allowed for the identification and mapping of urban locations perceived by residents as symbolically significant, culturally meaningful, or economically vital, allowing the study to recognise those areas not only for their functional roles within the city but also for their capacity to evoke collective memory, identity, and emotional investment. Such insights proved crucial in enriching the spatial analysis with qualitative dimensions that are often overlooked in conventional urban studies. Notably, this phase highlighted the value of integrating local knowledge and everyday lived experience into the analytical process: by incorporating community narratives and perceptions, the research aligned with a growing body of literature that emphasises the co-production of urban knowledge and the importance of participatory approaches in spatial planning and analysis (Lynch, 1960; Waterton, Smith, 2010). The identification of these places significant for the community was translated into a graphical way through perceptual maps (Fig. 9, Fig 10) and representations that explain the value attributed to certain urban elements by citizens (Fig. 13).

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The resilience of minor historic centres stems from their capacity to convey intangible cultural values alongside their tangible heritage, embodying practices, traditions, and social interactions inscribed within space (Riegl, 1982). This quality makes them essential case studies for the development of integrated methodologies that link architectural conservation, landscape preservation and perception of place, in accordance with the principles of the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe, 2000). Through an interdisciplinary methodology – integrating drone and terrestrial surveying, historical research, and community perception studies – the project models a three-dimensional virtual space and a graphic representation that merges qualitative and quantitative data, seeking an approach which documents but also interprets the built landscape as a dynamic, culturally embedded system. By

Fig. 9 and Fig.10 - Perception map of Piazzola sul Brenta. Urban area of the Villa Contarini, the park of the Villa and the Dome. Materials and colours are emphasised. Graphic elaboration by the authors.

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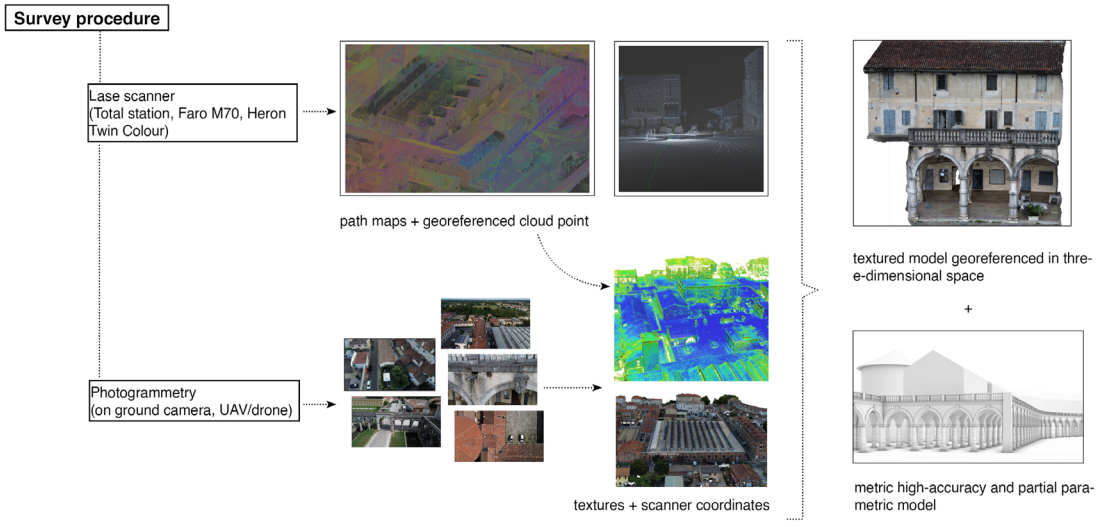

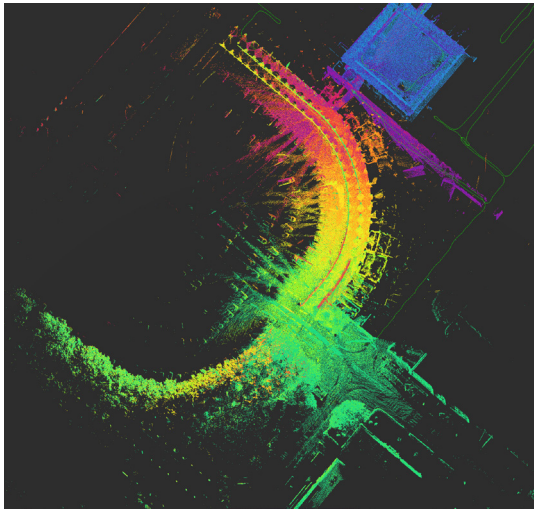

Fig. 11 - On the left, diagram summarising the procedures for processing data obtained from the morphological survey of Piazzola sul Brenta, using laser scanners and photogrammetry. Elaboration by the authors.

Fig. 12 - Above, extraction of the point cloud from the laser scanner survey of the portico in Piazza Camerini. Elaboration by the authors.

foregrounding both spatial and perceptual dimensions of place, the research contributes to current debates on how to preserve and communicate the cultural value of historic centres, proposing a methodological framework that can be replicated in other similar contexts, emphasising the importance of a multidisciplinary, participatory, and historically grounded reading of the territory. Considering the growing need to interpret and represent the knowledge embedded in urban and territorial systems, particularly the dynamic relationships between natural contexts and historic built fabric, there is a necessity for a methodology that combines digital innovation with traditional research approaches. This integration allows for the development of multi-layered visualisations that do not merely document physical reality but construct a meaningful representation of the cultural, spatial, and perceptual dimensions of place, aiming to connect past, present and future, going beyond simple cataloguing to stimulate local valorisation actions and to implement concrete planning, protection, and enhancement processes.

The research recognizes the need to go beyond the canonical representations of the historical landscape, seeking graphic forms able to aggregate perceptive data and intangible values to the metric-morphological data (Colaceci, 2024), shifting from a static world representation to a living and continuously transforming one, due to visualize the dynamics of natural systems, natural processes and interactions with the built environment (Rabazo Martin, 2024). The three-dimensional model presented here constitutes a virtual and dynamic space capable of integrating and cross-referencing diverse datasets, including historical maps as well as material, morphological, and urban data derived from architectural and urban analyses. In the subsequent phases of the research, psychological data collected through citizen surveys will also be incorporated, with the aim of identifying the artificial or natural elements perceived as most valuable by the community. In doing so, it transcends its traditional representational function and becomes a multidimensional interface—a space of synthesis between quantitative measurement, perceptual experience, and historical memory.

Through the use of digital technologies, the potential to significantly transform the way minor historical centres are studied, documented, and interpreted is relevant: by enabling the integration of heterogeneous data – from spatial metrics to community perceptions – these tools offer new forms of strategic, interdisciplinary engagement with the landscape. From a graphic point of view, the research tries to make explicit an identity map of the place, through stratifications of readings – analytical, synthetic, abstract and playful – where the drawing takes on a cognitive and planning fun-

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ction to interpret the instances of digital transition and communication of the heritage, strengthening the emotional bond between citizens and urban space, considering it fundamental for sustainable and participatory conservation.

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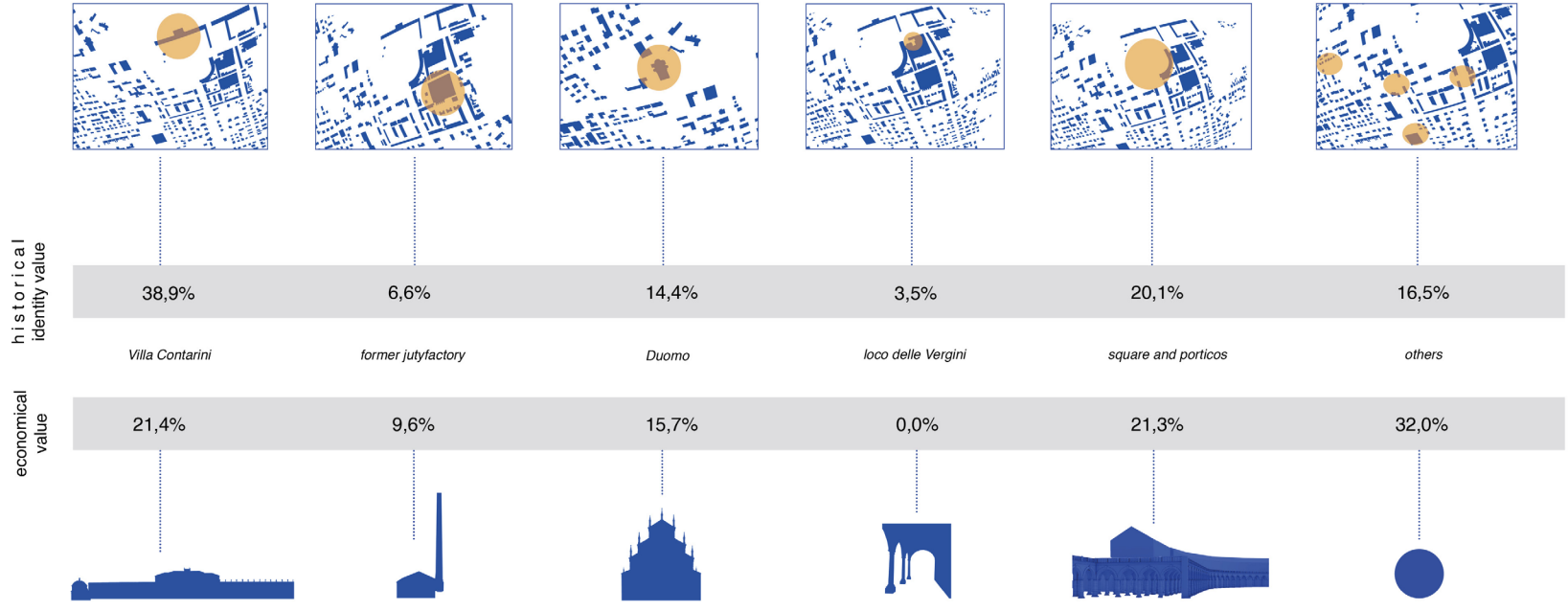
Project website: https://www.consorzioinest.it/en/
Participants of the iNEST research group, coordinated by the Department of General Psycology fo Padua: Department of General Psychology (DPG) – Prof. Luciano Gamberini, Prof.ssa Francesca Pazzaglia e Dott.ssa Laura Miola; Department of Developmental and Social Psychology (DPSS) – Prof. Alessio Vieno; Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Pedagogy, and Applied Psychology – Prof. Adriano Zamperini; Department of Civil, Environmental and Architectural Engineering (ICEA) – Prof. Andrea Giordano, Dr. Gianmario Guidarelli, PhD candidate Greta Montanari; Department of Cultural Heritage: Archaeology and History of Art, Cinema and Music (DBN) - Prof. Jacopo Bonetto, Prof.ssa Elena Svalduz, Dott. Guido Furlan. T h e questionnaires referred to are part of this project and are the result of collaboration between the Department of General Psychology od Padua (DPG) and CORILA - Consorzio per il coordinamento delle ricerche inerenti al sistema lagunare di Venezia.

Fig. 13 - On the left, diagram showing some of the results (in percentage) from the questionnaires administered to citizens. The questions asked respondents to identify three places in Piazzola sul Brenta that had the greatest historical and economic value for the subject.



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