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In copertina: The room project with movable stands, authors' rendering

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# Italian Community Cinemas and Their Post-pandemic Role in Fragile Territories

## **Abstract**

The essay provides a reflection and proposal, based on previous research, about the revitalisation of the Italian Catholic Church's Community Cinemas network, often located in fragile territories: marginal, rural, suburban areas and significant metropolitan areas outskirts. Community Cinemas are not just merely a projection room, but rather small and diffused cultural epicentres, deeply rooted in the Italian culture and resilient to the crisis of movie theatres and cultural services exacerbated by the pandemic. Considering their value and their distribution in the Italian territory, the Community Cinema model seems to be fitting with the post-COVID-19 scenario and policy agenda: in the urban areas it can offer a community and recreational space closer to where inhabitants live, in line with recent proposals for a 15-minutes city. In the Italian inner areas, it can contribute to repopulation policies based not only on the provision of basic services, but of a new social and cultural infrastructure.

## **Keywords**

community, urban regeneration, rural areas

## 1. Fragile Territories and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Community Cinemas, located from the smallest villages to the peripheral areas of metropolitan cities, are part of the ACEC<sup>1</sup> network, which groups under its guidance the most part of the cinemas owned by the Italian Catholic Church<sup>2</sup>. There are approximately 620 cinemas of this kind in Italy (Cipriani, Parrini, 2008). They started to appear since the beginning of the Twentieth century, usually built close to the parish churches, in the area of the oratory, thanks to the prompt understanding that movies projections could be an instrument of socialisation, evangelisation, and fundraising for the charity activities. After the first period of autonomous operations, they established an association in 1949<sup>3</sup>.

In 2020, the world was affected by the most uncontrollable global pandemic of the last 100 years. After one year from the first total lockdown, limitations to social and economic activities (restaurants, museums, cinemas) persist and the pandemic led to at least two main different proposals about how to 'use' the COVID-19 emergency and its effects to favour a more balanced and sustainable organization of urban and non-urban areas. The first one is the notion of the so-called *15-minutes city*, developed in Paris by Carlos Moreno, the consultant behind the urban policies adopted by the Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo. The *15-minutes city* aims to organise the urban fabric to offer a variety of essential services characterised by the proximity to each neighbourhood. According to this vision, metropolis should be planned as a sort of aggregation of contiguous but autonomous villages, where schools, workplaces, gathering and cultural activities have a maximum distance of 15 minutes walking distance or by bike from the residents' homes (Fabris et al., 2020). The second one refers to the fact that during the pandemic some people decided to leave big cities and move to more isolated villages where the pandemic limitations could be better tolerated thanks to the possibility of remote working, the availability of bigger housing, lower costs of living, and the proximity to vast natural open spaces.

These two visions are not contrasting each other. They are different outputs driven by the same logic: relieving the pressure over the urban areas and creating more sustainable local microenvironments. They are even complementary: the **15-minutes city** tries to redefine the urban space as a sum of islands, overcoming the idea of the contraposition between centres and peripheries. The marginal villages' repopulation proposals, supported by the new technological possibilities, take the same concept and expand its boundaries from the metropolitan areas to the whole Italian territory.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced somehow to rapidly implement solu-

1 Acronym for *Associazione Cattolica Esercenti Cinema*.

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

3 Source: <https://www.saledellacomunita.it/chi-siamo/storia-dellacec/> (last accessed 28-07-2021).

tions and proposals for existing problems, facing different challenges for the fragile territories: in the peripheries improving the quantity and quality of social public spaces; in the villages rebuilding the social fabric in order to re-create a sense of community and making their repopulation permanent and not just a temporary shelter for occasional 'city quitters' (Rosenkranz, 2018).

Both these territorial contexts present a peculiar infrastructure, part of the Italian tradition, which could become an important element for revitalisation strategies: The Community Cinemas. During the pandemic, this long-established network of Community Cinemas has been a reference point with several initiatives, mainly but not only digital<sup>4</sup>.

## 2. The Distribution and Territoriality of Italian Community Cinemas

According to a research commissioned by ACEC to the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano, the Community Cinemas have quite a peculiar distribution among Italian residential areas with different sizes: 19% of them is in villages with less than 5,000 inhabitants, 25% in centres between 5,000 and 10,000 inhabitants, 17% in small towns between 10,000 and 20,000 inhabitants, 16% finds place in conurbation up to 50,000 inhabitants. The remaining lies in bigger conurbations, with 10% and 13% respectively in towns from 5,000 to 100,000 inhabitants and cities whose population is above 100,000 (Burlot, Fanchi, 2017: 5).

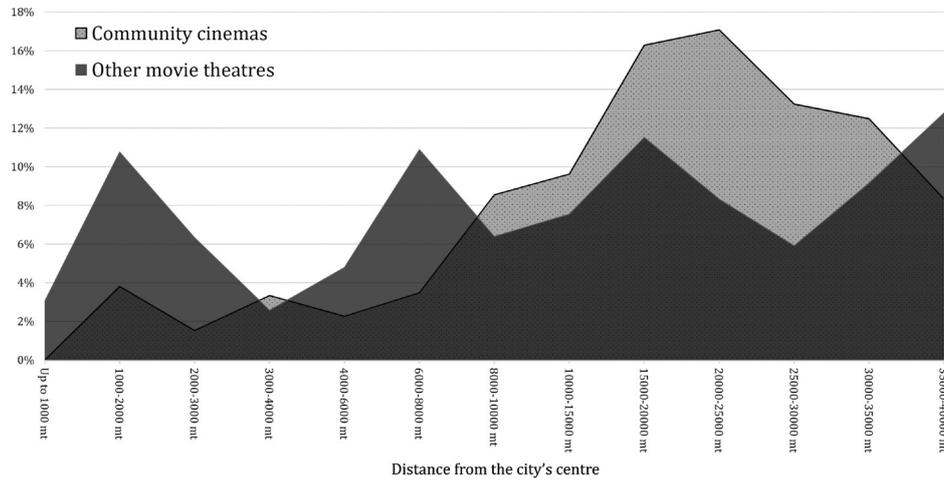
In order to appreciate better the geographic distribution of Community Cinemas, a closer look at such distribution is needed, also in comparison with that of 'standard' movie theatres. The evidence presented hereafter is based on the geolocation of all Community Cinemas and of other movie theatres in Italy, and on exhaustive information about their characteristics in the year 2018 provided by the Italian Ministry of Culture based on SIAE data.

In the case of big cities, and the *Wir* potential for becoming **15-minute cities**, the analysis focuses on the metropolitan area of Milan. Figure 1 represents the distribution of Community Cinemas on the one hand, and of other movie theatres on the other, based on their distance from Milan's city centre. The spatial distribution of the two typologies of theatres is rather different. In the areas closer to the city centre, 'standard' movie theatres concentrate in either the urban core or the suburban areas, as confirmed by their relatively low frequency in the 2,000-6,000 meter distance range from the city centre (**Figure 1**). Community Cinemas in this area, on the contrary, are much more evenly distributed. Most of Community Cinemas, however, are concentrated in outer, peri-urban and more peripheral areas; and again, their distribution in those latter areas looks smoother with

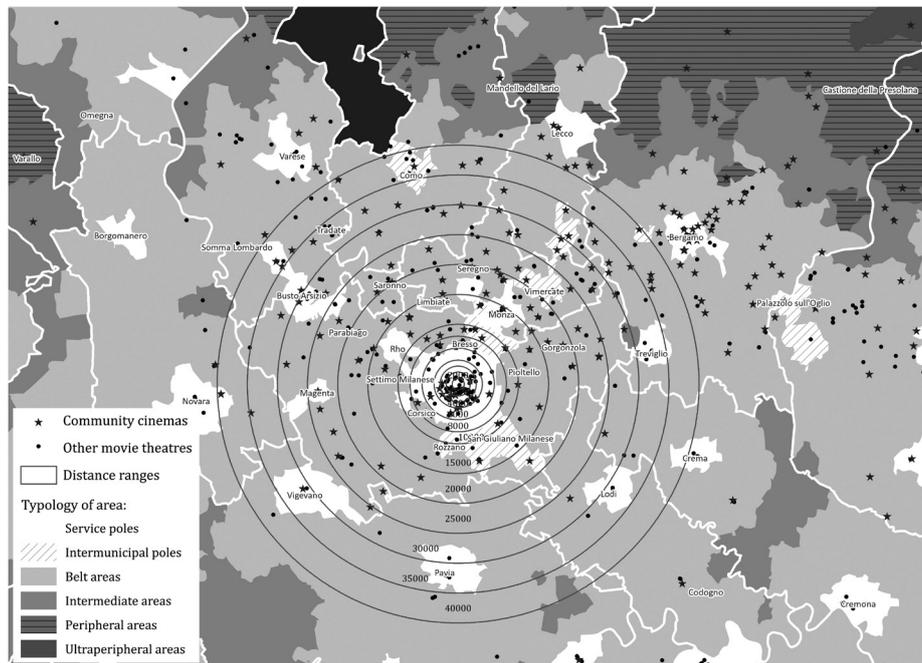
4 Many Community Cinemas were part of the #ioRestoinSala initiative, a network of virtual cinemas streaming a selection of art-house movies and, in a more symbolic way, they turned on the foyers' lights on May 8th 2020, for a coordinate flash mob during the David di Donatello Cinema Award ceremony.

respect to that of other movie theatres, which are more concentrated within 15 to 20 kilometres from the centre and, even more, in the 35-to-40 kilometres distance range.

**Figure 2** represents the location of Community Cinemas in and around the city of Milan, to appreciate more in details their actual spatial distribution and also to provide a better idea about where in the urban and suburban area the distance ranges mentioned above are.

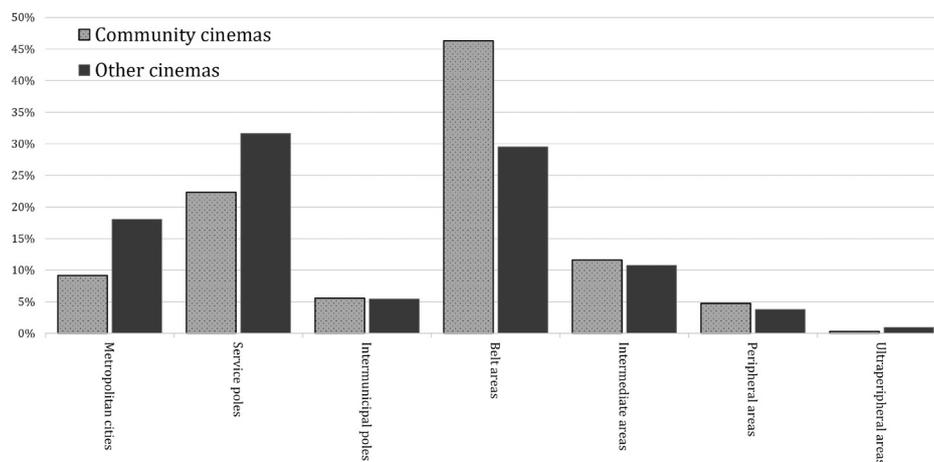


**Figure 1.** Distribution of Community Cinemas and other movie theatres in and around the city of Milan: percentage of cinemas per distance from the city's centre, 2018. Source: elaboration based on MIBACT and SIAE data



**Figure 2.** Location of Community Cinemas and other movie theatres around the city of Milan, 2018. Source: Filippo Celata

In the case of inner areas, **Figure 3** and **Figure 4** provide evidence about the location of all Community Cinemas and other movie theatres, based on the classification of Italian municipalities produced in the framework of the National Strategy for Inner Areas (Barca *et al.*, 2014). The classification is aimed to identify Italian inner areas – i.e. ‘intermediate’, ‘peripheral’ and ‘ultra-peripheral’ areas - according to their distance from ‘service poles’ - i.e. municipalities or groups of municipalities that include some basic educational, health and transport services. Such distance is, respectively, of more than 20 (intermediate), 40 (peripheral) and 75 (ultra-peripheral) minutes of travel. On this basis, we introduced a distinction within the ‘pole’ areas between the ten most populated municipalities – defined, in the figure, as ‘metropolitan cities’<sup>5</sup> – and the others. What emerges, is that the distribution of Community Cinemas is not radically different from that of ‘standard’ movie theatres; however, Community Cinemas are slightly less frequent in the most central, equipped, urbanized and wealthy areas of Italy, while being relatively more frequent in those municipalities classified as ‘belt’ areas, and only slightly more frequent in intermediate and peripheral areas. Figure 2 can give an idea about where those areas are located in the case of the city-region of Milan. Figure 4, finally, represent all Community Cinemas located in Italian municipalities classified as ‘inner areas’, and the number of shows hosted by each of them in the year 2018.

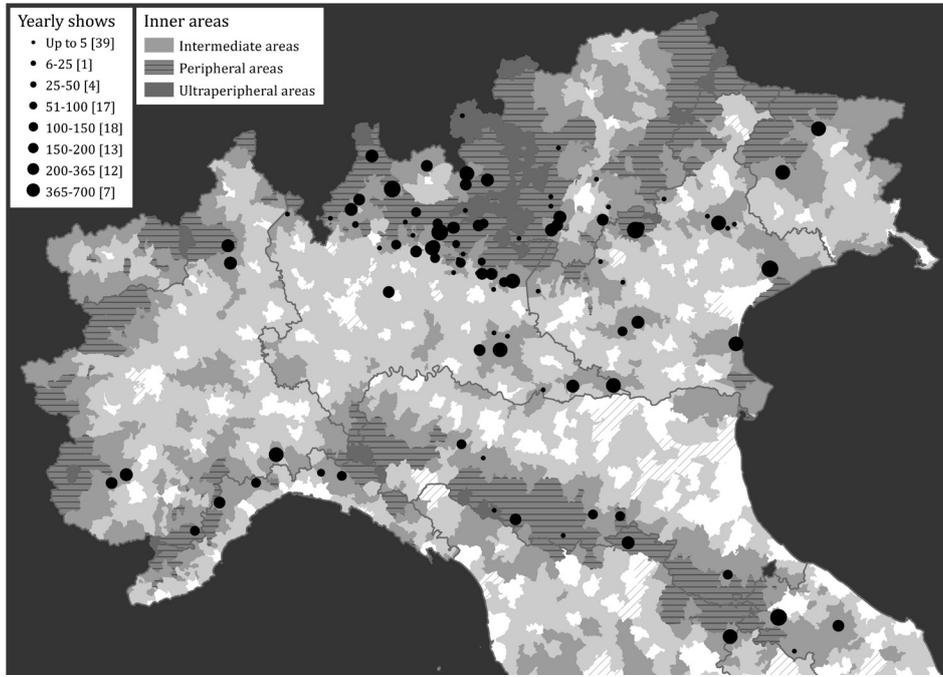


**Figure 3.** Distribution of Community Cinemas and other movie theatres in Italian municipalities, based on their classification according to the National Strategy for Inner Areas.  
Source: elaboration based on MIBACT, SIAE and MEF data.

A few more points can help in appreciating better the potentiality of Community Cinemas for inner areas. First, the data reported in Figures 3 and 4 refer only to those Community Cinemas that are included in the MIBACT/SIAE database; those are approximately two thirds of the 626 Community Cinemas that currently exist in Italy. The other third,

5 The municipalities of Rome, Milan, Napoli, Turin, Palermo, Genoa, Bologna, Florence, Bari, Catania.

probably, was not operating in 2018 – the year to which the data refer to – but is equipped to do so. The evidence reported in Figure 4 about the relatively small number of shows Community Cinemas host yearly, clearly shows that this infrastructure is heavily underused. Second, a substantial portion of Italian parishes have a space or a proper theatre that could potentially host a movie theatre. Third, those theatres serve also other purposes.



**Figure 4.** Community Cinemas in Italian inner areas.  
Source: elaboration based on MIBACT, SIAE and MEF data.

The research by Burlot and Fanchi (2017) gives a wide range of figures about the plurality of functions Community Cinemas host. The central focus is, of course, the movie projection, but many of them are also spaces for other cultural activities: theatre, live music, dancing as well as other forms of community gatherings such as parties or school sessions. Considering their distribution and cultural activity, it's clear they provide the public function of a cultural centre. Their potential in light of a strategy for inner areas based on the provision of cultural and recreational activities is therefore enormous.

Today ACEC is facing many challenges to find ways to respond to the pressure of new movies typologies diffusion through digital platforms. The situation became more complicated with the recent explosion of the global pandemic that had a significant impact on the cultural activities requiring a physical gathering. Despite these facts, the Association is alive and well, and celebrated the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary with the participation of key people of the cinema industry, distributors,

producers, politicians and academics<sup>6</sup>. During the convention took place the presentation of a publication about the actual condition and the activities run by eleven Community Cinemas spread all around Italy, chosen as an excellent example demonstrating the ***Sale della Comunità*** potential in defining a new typology of social and cultural centre diffused over the Italian territory (Chiarulli, 2019).

ACEC was very conscious of this potential already, and in 2017 decided to explore it asking to the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of the Politecnico di Milano to develop a research about the transformation and upgrade possibilities for their screening rooms (Balzarotti, Fabris, 2018). After the publication of the analytic research conducted by the Università Cattolica and after the considerations about facing new challenges of a mutated social and cultural scenario, the further questions were about the urban and architectural transformation required by this socio-economic context. Today, ACEC is exploring further the spatial distribution and territorial potential of Community Cinemas, in collaboration with the Università di Roma La Sapienza. The final goal is to define a new model for the Community Cinema, shifting from the romantic vision of a vintage arthouse cinema to the idea of a renewed, diffused and contemporary cultural centre.

### 3. The Force of Resilience

In fact, more than one-third of the Community Cinemas run their activity since more than 40 years (Burlot, Fanchi, 2017: 8), surviving a variety of challenges that the cinema business has faced along this period. These data highlight the longevity of the Community Cinema and underline the «unexpected quality» (Giraldo, 2017: 71) of their resilience, intended as the contrary of fragility.

In chronological order, the first element to undermine the popularity of cinema projections was the diffusion of the television. Then, in the '90s, we assisted to the rise of the multiplex: a new typology of multiple-rooms cinema, whose spread was fast among the suburbs of the metropolitan areas, integrated to the shopping mall model imported from the United States. About this, the Community Cinemas are smaller and less often multiplex, with respect to standard movie theatres, which also explain their lower territorial concentration.

Later, since the beginning of the 2000s, a technological leap required the shift from film projection to digital projection. The cost to purchase the new technology was substantial, particularly for many small business theatres with low annual budgets, but most of them survived and currently the shift from analogic to digital technology projection is almost completed (Brunella, 2016)<sup>7</sup>. Most recently, in the last decade, we assisted to the global transformation of how we usually consume

6 The acec annual convention is called "sdc Days". The 2019 edition, from the 6th to the 8th of December took place in Rome as a special edition for the 70th anniversary.

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

audio-visual products such as movies, TV shows and other forms of multimedia contents. This massive change, from physical to digital and capillary distribution and fruition of Medias has consequences also in the way we have been used to imagine the space for the real-life gathering to share time, for example watching a movie in a theatre. The diffusion of digital platforms is conditioning various forms of spending free time with other types of social and cultural activities. In other words, the focal point of the competition shifted from the similarity of contents (both cinemas and digital platforms diffuse audio-visual products) to the modality of fruition (real-life gatherings, museums, restaurants etc.) (Stratta, 2019: 139). This foresight is a clear indication about how to respond to the new scenario, aiming to amplify the social and cultural features of the cinemas, which is where the resilience of the Community Cinemas plays a central and anticipatory role.

Resilience is just the ability that allowed the Community Cinemas to overcome the change, but the central question is about the causes of this capacity. It is possible to identify two leading causes, closely related to each other. The first is about their social and cultural profile which is «unique in the Italian cinema context» (Giraldo, 2017: 69). They are not a public service, and they are not a merely commercial business. The Community Cinemas are part of the Third Sector, which defines the group of private entities that place themselves between the State and the market, providing an array of cultural and social-oriented services. The peculiar vocation of being places of public utility for a community is what makes them flexible and adaptive to the mutable users' needs. Their ability to be **places** was the key to survive to the multiplex appearance inside the **non-place** of the shopping malls. Their natural inclination to be **social** helped them to be different from the **socially sterile** consumption of television products. The second reason behind the longevity of Community Cinemas lies in their «vagueness» (Fiaschini, 2017: 95). As mentioned before, they are not cinemas nor theatres, dancing halls, exhibition spaces or conference halls, but it is possible to find all these functions in their standard programs. The cultural offer varies from case to case, and it is **tailor-made** for the local needs making use of the local resources. These points of strength, together with their territorial distribution, were one of the central aspects that led to the development of the guidelines born from the research commissioned by ACEC to the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of Politecnico di Milano (Balzarotti, Fabris, 2018). The research gave indications about an innovative functional program and architectural/technological solution to integrate them in the **'cinema of the future'**.

#### 4. Research by doing

In order to define the guidelines four case studies have been identified to develop a “research by doing” process. The four different situations tried to cover the largest possible set of typologies represented by the Community Cinemas as follows:

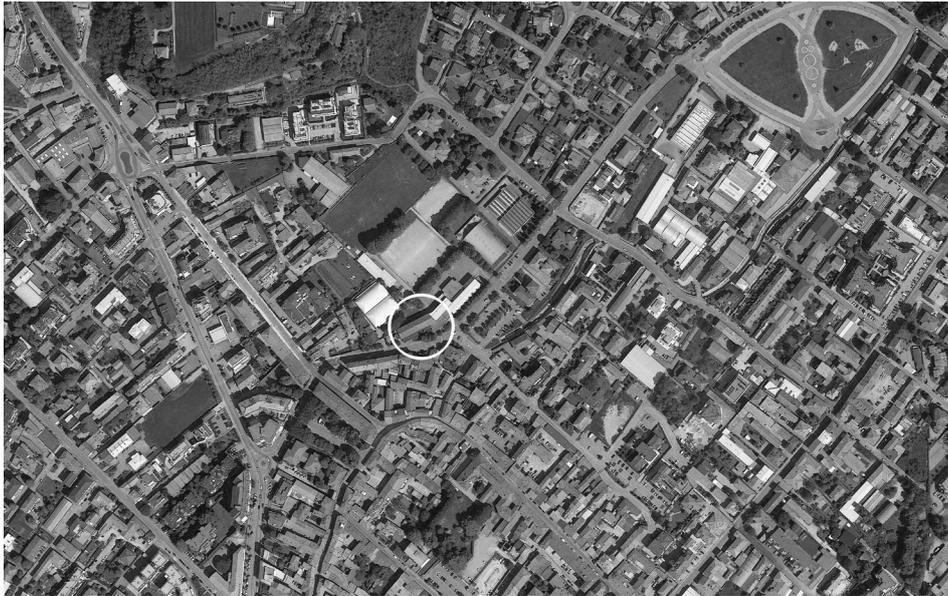
the creation from scratch of a small cinema within an under-used space of the oratory in Guidizzolo (Mantua) (**Figure 5, Figure 6**); the revitalization of a medium size existing cine-theatre, abandoned for 20 years, in a separate and independent building in Mariano Comense (Como) (**Figure 7, Figure 8**); the extension of a small currently operating cinema connecting an under-used and articulated succession of spaces to the main room in Sampierdarena (Genoa) (**Figure 9, Figure 10**); the transformation of a large and renowned cine-theatre into a multiplex in Bologna (**Figure 11, Figure 12**).



**Figure 5.** The urban fabric near the Guidizzolo (MN) Community Cinema (in the white circle)  
Source: elaboration based on Google Maps© image



**Figure 6.** The Guidizzolo Oratory from outside.  
Source: authors' photo courtesy.



**Figure 7.** The urban fabric near the Mariano Comense (CO) Community Cinema (in the white circle).  
Source: elaboration based on Google Maps© image.



**Figure 8.** The abandoned facility of the Community Cinema in Mariano Comense.  
Source: authors' photo courtesy.



**Figure 9.** The urban fabric near the Sampierdarena (GE) Community Cinema (in the white circle).  
Source: elaboration based on Google Maps© image



**Figure 10.** The former entrance of the "Club Amici del Cinema" in Sampierdarena.  
Source: authors' photo courtesy.



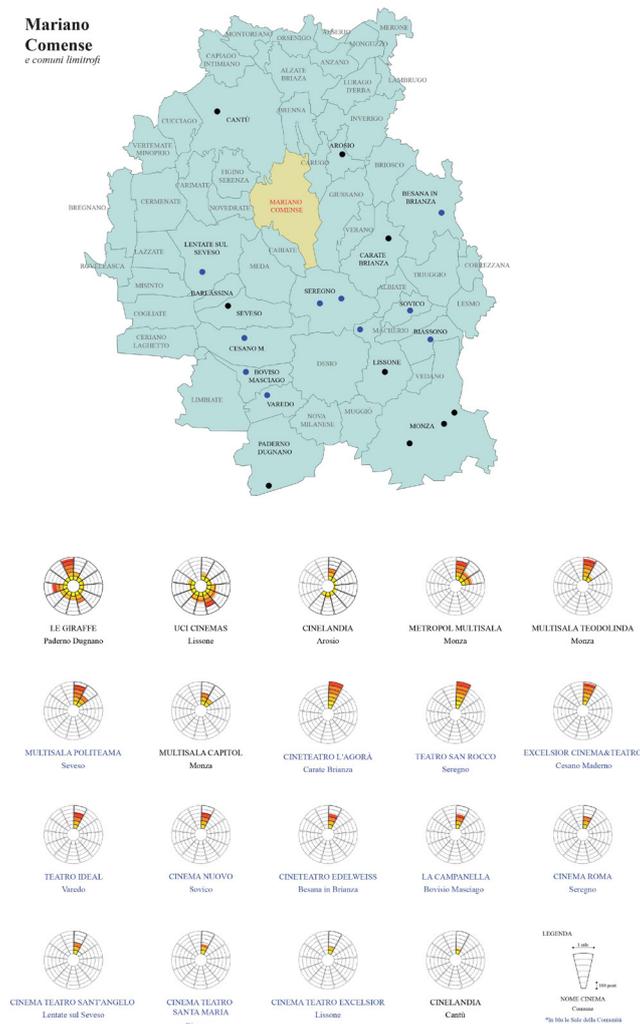
**Figure 11.** The urban fabric near the Bologna Community Cinema (in the white circle).  
Source: elaboration based on Google Maps© image.



**Figure 12.** The entrance of the "Antoniano" complex in Bologna.  
Source: authors' photo courtesy.

All these case studies had, as a starting point, a common schematic organization which is very simple and linear; in most cases, there is a single entrance, a foyer with a corner for the bar and just one projection room, often with too many seats for the current standards

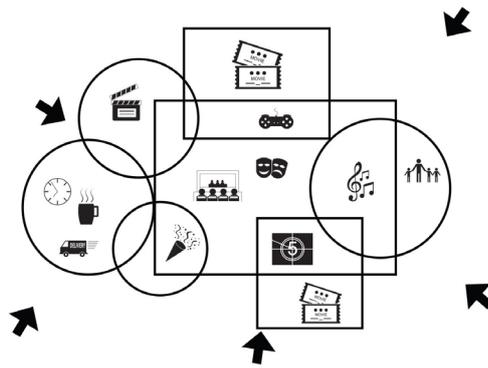
(Balzarotti, Fabris, 2018, pp.22-29)<sup>8</sup>. A territorial comparison with the 'standard' cinemas in the same area showed that this schematic distribution is anachronistic for many reasons, mainly because the trend for commercial businesses is to have a main projection room that can be very large (up to 400 seats) and then as many small projection rooms as possible (**Figure 13**). This suggested that to renovate the Community Cinema the first step is the reshuffle the existing rigid pattern into a more fluid and dynamic environment, composed by a collection of more flexible and, where possible, separable spaces. In other words to overcome the idea of 'single space = single function' and reorganise the facilities according to a 'Poliedric space = multiple functions' conceptual layout (**Figure 14**).



**Figure 13.** Size and rooms amount comparison between Community Cinemas and Standard Cinemas in Mariano Comense area.

Source: elaboration based on authors' field research, 2018.

8 The comparison between commercial cinemas and community cinemas in the four areas of the case-studies showed that there is a trend in commercial cinemas to choose a solution with smaller rooms in terms of number of seats.



**Figure 14.** The conceptual layout of the poliedric and multifunctional Community Cinema.  
Source: authors' courtesy.

Moreover, the variety and flexibility of space is the necessary infrastructure for a wider functional program, specifically made according to the local community needs and potential. As a reference, in the Sampierdarena project the refurbishment proposal started from the idea to re-join the two rooms available and bring back the main entrance in the lobby of the theatre (*Figure 10*), replacing the actual entrance (barely visible from the street) and creating a more visible, permeable and welcoming entrance. The new lobby would be big enough to host a café (**Figure 15**) which would occupy most of the space, the ticket office and their technical spaces. The space functions as a corner to support the cinema activities, but also as an independent social space, open all day for people who need a space to gather, work or study. It would be also suitable for the 'neighbourhood reception' function. This semi-public, semi-open space would be a sort of living room for the area and it would work as a hinge to connect the life of the neighbourhood with the life of the cultural centre. The new foyer is also connected with the former theatre room, whose renovation offers the possibility to insert an automated movable seating system, allowing the use as projection room and at the same time having an empty space for classes or other gathering events in the morning and in the afternoon (**Figure 16**).



**Figure 15.** The foyer/bar/neighborhood reception in Sampierdarena Community Cinema.  
Source: authors' rendering.



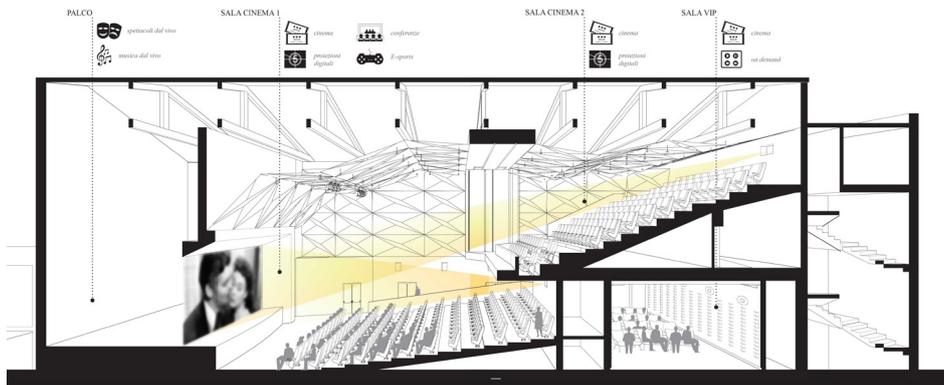
**Figure 16.** From top to bottom: the existing theater room – the room project with movable stands open – the room project with movable stands closed.  
Source: authors' courtesy and renderings.

For the Case-study in Mariano Comense, the reorganisation of the distribution elements led to the proposal of adding a smaller, secondary projection room in place of a large and useless corridor (**Figure 17**). This room can work in synergy with the afternoon activities for the younger people in the neighbourhood, can host small concert and presentation, extending the living hours of the facility allowing to have a better control of the expense to keep open the activity. It would also be useable as a ‘nursery room’ during special projections for young parents who wants to enjoy a movie, as already happens in some private cinemas<sup>9</sup>. The same strategy was adopted for the Bologna Case study, obtaining a third small projection room below the main stands (**Figure 18**).



**Figure 17.** The secondary projection room in the Mariano Comense project  
Source: authors' renderings.

9 The Anteo Palazzo Cinema, recently opened in Milan, is a modern multi-purpose private complex that offers this kind of service among many others.



**Figure 18.** The new configuration of the Community Cinema in Bologna led to have three different projection rooms. The two main rooms are separated by a movable acoustic partition and can be rejoined for theatrical representations or concerts.  
Source: authors' drawing.

These examples focused on the neighbouring social environment aspect of the Community Cinema; two possible keywords emerged to drive the process of space redesign: ***multipurpose space*** and ***social aggregation***. An extensive overview of services and activities responding to the social needs of spending quality time together should be the basis of the new cinema spaces for urban regeneration. In other words, Community Cinemas could help in using existing cultural heritage and increase its value, creating a stronger sense of community, immersed in a welcoming environment equipped with specific technologies that can offer a different experience from the home-cinema alternatives. It is possible to say that imagining the future of these spaces, necessarily means to both update and enhance their deepest past. This can be considered as a strategic asset to mark their role in the urban and suburban scenario with a radical modification of their architectonic structure. The goal of renovating a Community Cinema should overcome the idea of just building a container dedicated to the consumption of products and goods. The architectural space, the way to live in this space with other people of the community, and the services offered, should create a homogenous image that can be intended ***as a content in itself***.

According to this concept, a Community Cinema should also expand its boundaries and be the sparkle for regeneration processes that affect an entire neighbourhood or a small town, promoting synergies between the existing institutions and social actors. This aspect, one of the most important part of the project guidelines for the future of the Community Cinemas, happened to be the key factor for their possible central role in the mutated scenario that appeared as the COVID-19 pandemic exploded.

#### **4. The COVID-19 Pandemic Challenge**

During the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Community Cinemas demonstrated again their resilience. The year 2019 was encouraging in terms of audience and revenue for the Italian cinemas, characterised by a significant growth after years of negative numbers

(ANICA, 2020). The market increase could be the sign of an imminent balance after the adaptation of the cinemas and the consolidation of the digital platforms. In this optimistic beginning of 2020, the cinemas, as the majority of cultural operators, were forced to shut down their activities and still now uncertainty persists about their return to normality. They suffered a total loss of revenue, and after the first month of re-opening, in June 2020, the box-office data were not encouraging; just one-fifth of the Italian cinemas decided to restart the projections<sup>10</sup>. In this scenario of insecurity and discouragement, some perspectives for the Community Cinemas could rise, and the critical aspect lies in their proper nature of cultural infrastructure diffused among the Italian territory. In the first place, the pandemic effect of the lockdown showed, like some sort of massive-scale social experiment, that the need for social interactions could not be replaced entirely by digital surrogates. In that sense, the results of a survey conducted during the pandemic give optimistic indications. 46% of the interviewed declared that they had the intention, after the COVID-19 pandemic, to reduce only for a limited period their social activities (eating out, going to malls and cinemas). The 34% declared to have no intentions to reduce their frequentations, and 16% only 16% anticipated a long essence from social events<sup>11</sup>. The second aspect is related to the recent developments in urban and territorial planning, rose after the pandemic or immediately before, such as the **15-minutes city** concept mentioned in the first paragraph.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Italian firm Systematica released two reports (Transform Transport, 2020a; Transform Transport, 2020b) that mapped the city of Milan basing on the 15-minutes accessibility to green areas and public spaces, and dividing the municipal area into three levels of access to services: poor, intermediate and relevant. Part of the public realm mapping focused on the oratories, highlighting their role of gathering places in the Italian local culture. The list of essential neighbourhood services also includes the cinemas, pinpointing their persisting relevance as locations for the cultural identity definition.

At the same time, Stefano Boeri released an interview to the national press suggesting the pandemic could become the occasion to rethink the occupation of the small villages sprawled over the Italian territory (Giovara, 2020). To this end, the more or less temporary effects of the pandemic is obviously not enough. The success of this new vision for the Italian villages passes through the implementation of digital infrastructures, fiscal incentives, accessibility improvement, place branding, and territorial marketing which are all diffused instruments supported by an ample literature, and in line with the National Strategy for Inner Areas mentioned above. Anyway, these tools are often finalised to the growth of a place attractiveness, specifically related to tourism (OCED, 2009). Boeri's controversial idea plays on a

10 Source: <https://www.longtake.it/news/box-office-italia-la-situazione-a-un-mese-dalla-riapertura-dei-cinema> (last accessed 28-08-2020).

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

different level, aiming to create the conditions to transform the scarcely inhabited villages into a real alternative to dense urban living and attracting new residents rather than occasional visitors (see also De Rossi, 2019; Cersosimo, Donzelli, 2020). Fiorello Primi, President of the *'Borghi più Belli di Italia'* Association, aims to reach the same objective: «our role is not solely to provide holiday destinations [...] the villages could live again only if younger generations could permanently live and work there» (Nadotti, 2020). To increase this kind of human capital (Faggian, McCann, 2009) is necessary to build also a social infrastructure (Boeri A. *et al.*, 2017) that can allow the re-birth of a community which participate in the local culture, where the culture is «a capital asset accumulated by a community whose members refer to it to connote their identity» (Santagata, 2002: 10).

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

## **5. Rooted in the Italian Cultural Heritage**

The compliance of the Community Cinema to definition of the cultural heritage according to the Faro Convention (Council of Europe, 2005) makes clear that it's more than a standard commercial business. It embodies the capacity of preserving the traditions and at the same time promoting forms of constant evolution, led by the community.

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

The heritage values of the Community Cinemas network, defined by the Minister of Culture Dario Franceschini as «authentic culture keep-

ers for many Italian small communities» (Franceschini, 2015) is also in their ability to be active players in the definition of the built environment. This aspect is clear also to some private movie theatres that proposed to reformulate their spaces with a formula somehow similar to that of the Community Cinema, giving value to the social aspect of watching a movie as a communitarian and shared experience.

The variety of spaces and contents is the tools used to reinterpret the cinema location as a public space. According to Lionello Cerri, the director of the new Anteo Cinema in Milan<sup>12</sup>, «this aspect is important both from the social and the urban point of view because cities and villages live thanks to a container that resume the function of bringing people together that was proper not only of the cinemas but also of the bars and the oratories» (Pasquale, 2019: 135)<sup>13</sup>.

The cultural and social values that define the Community Cinema network are followed by another positive aspect coming from its revitalisation. Rediscovering and reactivating the Community Cinema facilities in the Italian villages means, in many cases, to update and re-use existing architectures that are part of the cultural heritage. In this perspective, the re-birth of semi-abandoned local communities could also become a form a sustainable development for a country that lives the paradox of continuously losing population (ISTAT, 2020) and at the same time increase its soil consumption (SNPA, 2020).

## 6. Nearer Spaces, Newer Spaces

The Community Cinema model and its possible renewal according to the design guidelines proposed by Balzarotti and Fabris in 2018, before the pandemic, showed not only the possibility of their adaptation to the post-pandemic scenario, but also some strengths that make their improvement suitable for the fragile territories re-vitalisation policies.

Led by the two key concepts of multi-functionality and social cohesion, the future Community Cinema can respond to the necessity of a more diffused distribution of social and cultural public spaces in the urban, suburban and rural context, with a specific need of a socialisation core for the re-activation of communities in peripheral and inner areas. This request from territories of social and cultural infrastructures and opportunities, could be in part covered by revitalising the local Community Cinemas, whose strengths can be summarized as in the following points.

First, the Community Cinema is not providing a mere film projection facility. Since their foundation, their very essence is closer to the contemporary idea of cultural centre. Second, the distribution of Community Cinema over the territory is much more diffused than that of private movie theatres or other cultural services, and potentially even more diffused, thanks to their connection with the Italian Catholic Church, which has a capillary presence even in the smallest Italian

<sup>12</sup> *Anteo Palazzo Cinema* is one of the most innovative and multi-purpose cinema recently opened in Milan (2019).

<sup>13</sup> Translated by the authors from the Italian edition.

communities. Third, the Community Cinema network is already established and rooted in the Italian culture. It can be increased in number by re-thinking and re-designing existing and under-used spaces that can be easily found in many Italian parishes. Fourth, the Community Cinema model is replicable and scalable.

The post-pandemic scenario is, in other words, an occasion for the widespread application of a new model from Community Cinemas, renewed and ready to be the starting point for building lively and cohesive local communities. The future policies for the development of fragile territories already include also the planning of 'cultural assets', whose proximity with the people is crucial for their success. As a reference, considering just the cinema industry, approximately half of the Italian population never goes to the cinema: 18.2% of them declares that the cause is in the absence of a structure close to their residency, and it's the second most popular answer (ISTAT, 2017). This data is referring to traditional cinemas, but in the updated concept of Community Cinema, where the film vision is just the core of a broader cultural infrastructure, increasing the accessibility level of this typology of space is the occasion to re-launch also a wider cultural participation. In that sense, the renovation of Community Cinemas, after 'nearer spaces', should supply the need for 'newer spaces.' The first motivation among people who do not attend cinemas is a preference to watch the movies through the television or digital platforms (ISTAT, 2017) and this is more of a cultural issue: the cinema of the future can't supply the sole function of 'watching a movie', where more accessible alternatives exist. It has to be transformed to offer anywhere a renovated feeling to participate in a social act.

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