



Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali

DIREZIONE GENERALE ARCHEOLOGIA, BELLE ARTI E PAESAGGIO

Italian candidacy for the Landscape Award of the Council of Europe, 7th Edition

The Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Activities and Tourism (hereinafter MiBACT), following the invitation to participate in the 7th edition of the Landscape Award of the Council of Europe, has identified the Italian project which best represents Italian landscape culture, and demonstrates the strongest harmony with the European Landscape Convention.

This year as well, the MiBACT wanted to re-propose the effective methodology adopted in previous editions for the selection of the Italian candidacy for the COE Award, which allowed the individuation of high quality projects, and at the same time constituted an opportunity to raise awareness among a wide audience about landscape's cultural and social values. Therefore, an open and transparent procedure has been implemented and the competition announcement has been disseminated through a widespread campaign.

The MiBACT has strengthened the importance of this selection process of the Italian candidacy for the 7th edition of the COE Award, since the project will be awarded with the National Landscape Prize on the occasion of the National Landscape Day celebration (March 14th).

Thanks to the strong commitment of the MiBACT, the participation in the Italian competition has had a positive response, made feasible through online applications, reaching a number of about 100 candidates despite the difficult social conditions due to the COVID-19 emergency.

The Jury was set up by the MiBACT involving well-known personalities and experts, who are engaged in various aspects in the field of landscape.

After an in-depth examination, the Jury identified a range of particularly interesting projects. Finally, among these, **Biodiversity in the City. Bergamo, the Astino Valley** presented by *Fondazione della Misericordia Maggiore (Fondazione MIA)*, was identified as the most worthy of representing the Italian candidacy for the Landscape Award of the Council of Europe.

One of the most important aspects of the project is to have returned a landscape in a state of decay to the community, a landscape that had risked to be the object of private speculation. This important area located close to the city of Bergamo, is full of historical and environmental value and is an important identity-defining place for the city and the local community, holding a centuries-old history that goes back to the birth of the Monastery of Astino.

Starting from the 12th century, the presence of the Vallombrosan monks has shaped the landscape of an area that previously consisted entirely of woodland, by turning it into a system made of crops, irrigation channels and constructions, thus creating a treasure chest rich in quality and biodiversity. More recently, the local community's awareness about the value of the place, first led the State and the Municipality of Bergamo to impose restrictions to protect the Astino Valley from building speculation and then, in 1977, the regional government to establish the *Parco dei Colli di Bergamo* (Park of the Bergamo Hills). Nevertheless, the administrative restrictions have unfortunately not prevented the area from undergoing a progressive deterioration which has gradually made it necessary intervene for the recovery and enhancement of the Valley.

Therefore, the mobilization of the citizens and the political will to enhance this important portion of territory on the outskirts of Bergamo led to the construction of a shared planning and regeneration



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Via di San Michele 22, 00153 Roma - TEL. 06-6723.4401

mbac-dg-abap@mailcert.beniculturali.it

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process, via public-private partnerships, headed by *Fondazione MIA*. The Foundation was born in 1265 as a philanthropic confraternity for the assistance of the poor, the sick and prisoners and it still represents an important identity-defining institution for the citizens of Bergamo. Its participation as the leader of the project guarantees, among other things, a strong link with the local community, a significant focus on the social aspects and the enhancing of the spiritual vocation of the place.

The Jury has particularly appreciated the extraordinary multidimensionality which has been reached in the project, not only through the involvement of many and different actors, but, above all, through their harmonious integration, implementing an excellent directing job.

The project therefore shows great attention to the involvement of wide and diversified kinds of users and stakeholders, overcoming generational barriers, social classes and sector categories. The candidacy of the project itself is the result of a joint effort between all the actors involved in the process in various capacities, representing a further evidence of the community engagement.

The proposed strategic vision is also grounded from a scientific point of view, thanks to the fruitful collaboration with the University of Bergamo.

The detailed attention to the governance and the way in which the various actions are proposed and implemented constitute a sure guarantee of the continuity of the project and a full adhesion to sustainable development criteria.

In this well-thought-out programme, the recovery of the Monastery is only the starting point of a multilevel plan that goes from the scale of the single building to that of the Astino Valley, to the relationship with the city of Bergamo up to a national and international dimension, linked to the debate about the role of peri-urban areas.

The adherence to a broad vision and the multidisciplinary approach to the landscape is evident and starts from an agro-ecological sensibility that includes the economic-productive dimension, the environmental, the aesthetic and, last but not least, the social one, to which the project profitably dedicates particularly incisive actions.

The project highlights its effectiveness with a solid and complete implementation, substantiated by a plurality of coherent perspectives and actions, and proved to be a joyful and enthusiastic experience of shared values and an exemplary landscape transformation process.

Another element of worth, that the Jury was very keen to underline, is that the selected project was implemented and nominated by a community deeply affected by the first wave of the Covid-19 emergency. Despite the difficult situation, the *Fondazione MIA*, together with its partners, has found the strength not to interrupt the virtuous activities in its territory and to commit itself to make them known also through the participation in the Award. Its exemplarity testifies to the pride and the will of this tenacious and industrious community.

The project was selected for the effectiveness of the implemented actions and the adopted strategies that allowed the achievement of the set objectives, in full coherence with all the objectives set out in the MiBACT call, including:

1. Requalification and enhancement of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

The project's starting point was the restoration of the former Monastery, a building of high historical value, and of the works of art contained within it. Over time, many other restoration projects of traditional production-industry buildings have followed, such as *Cascina Mulino* (The Mill



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Farmstead) and the *Cascina Convento* (The Cloister Farmstead), for which new functions have been chosen, according to the nature of the artifacts and the activities of the Foundation. In addition, the archaeological excavations of the entire area have allowed the recovery of extraordinary finds for the Lombardy area dating from as early as the prehistoric era. In this way, it has also been possible to retrace the historical development of the area, from the prehistoric evidence of human presence, up to the network of channels that enabled water management in the Middle Ages.

2. Redevelopment and enhancement of ancient uses and rural landscapes.

The agricultural landscape of the Astino Valley is historically linked to the presence of the Monastery, which was the cornerstone for the agricultural transformation of the valley in the Middle Ages. In fact, The Vallombrosan monks shaped the landscape of the Valley, which up until then consisted entirely of woodland, by digging irrigation channels and introducing new crops. In the project, these historical activities of landscape transformation and management were therefore taken up again, guaranteeing the best possible protection, the continuity with the traditional crops and also ensuring a balance between agricultural areas of the valley and surrounding woods.

3. Redevelopment of urban, peri-urban areas and degraded or abandoned urban peripheries.

A further interesting element of the project is its location in a peri-urban area, characterized by an important landscape potential and in direct connection with the historical centre of Bergamo Alta (its Venetian Walls are a UNESCO site since 2017). The area, as already mentioned, was in a state of decay and protected from various attempts at speculation. It was finally recovered thanks to the commitment of the community.

4. Contrast to the hydrogeological risk.

The maintenance of the system of dry-stone walls and terraces, and the protection of the surface water grid and the permeability of the soil were decisive for a better management of rainwater and therefore also for the stabilization of the valley basin.

5. Environmental sustainability.

Great attention was paid by the project to the sustainable management of the resources, counteracting monocultures and incentivising biodiversity and agriculture conducted with organic techniques, in an ecological network project. The introduction of a mixed selection of crops, with the presence of some being documented in the valley since the Middle Ages, has determined the increase of the biodiversity of the Valley. Examples of such crops are vines, medicinal herbs, orchards, vegetable gardens, flax, hemp fibre, hops, that are all grown according to organic agricultural methods and inserted in a natural environment where a Chestnut-tree woodland dominates. Furthermore, the protection and increased amount of spontaneous vegetation between the plots of land and along the main ditches and pathways has actually created a web of ecological corridors (managed by the Botanical Garden), which fall within the R.E.R - *Rete Ecologica Regionale* (Regional Ecological Network).

6. Cultural integration between residents.

The organized events, which involved very different audiences in terms of age and interests, made it possible to implement the mission of the Foundation. Although it was historically centred on helping the weaker sections of the population, over time it became a strong point of reference for the whole



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local community, carrying out activities in close connection with the landscape of the valley. Nowadays, thanks to the numerous initiatives, the families of Bergamo and its surroundings have begun to frequent this area assiduously.

7. Implementation of forms of sustainable tourism.

With the recovery of the Monastery as a cultural attraction and venue for events, the creation of places of reference such as hospitality centres combined with the encouragement of soft mobility, have allowed the site to become a hub within a sustainable tourism regional network. In particular, this was possible with the following actions:

- the creation and recovery of pedestrian and cycling paths, both inside the area and to connect with the city.
- strengthening of reception and catering facilities within the valley.
- limitation of car access to residents only, but with the creation of a parking area at the entrance of the area to allow even people with reduced mobility to access and enjoy the landscape.

The increasing anthropic pressure, accentuated by the proximity of the area to the city centre and progressively concentrated on the weekend, was thus regulated in order to avoid any excessive touristic exploitation of the landscape.

8. Attention to accessibility and inclusion.

The project has deepened the study of the issues of mobility and accessibility, with particular attention for people with reduced mobility. The support of associations including those aimed at supporting people with disabilities has allowed the inclusion of disadvantaged people in the various activities that are carried out on site; in particular, the involvement of cooperatives of young people and disadvantaged people (e.g. Oikos, Ortinsema).

Recognizing the important qualities of the project, the Jury also appreciated the compliance of the implemented actions with the four criteria established within the COE Landscape Award rules document.

According to what it is highlighted in the form regarding **sustainable development**, it is clear how, starting from the needs of the local community, the regeneration of Astino has returned a large "vegetable garden" accessible through soft mobility to the city of Bergamo, a quality landscape capable of responding effectively to ecological needs, offering new economic opportunities to local companies and becoming a tool for social inclusion. The project has in fact built a stable and lasting territorial system, generating a concretely sustainable development that has permanently and positively influenced civic and social relations.

From an environmental point of view, the project is based on a Strategic Environmental Assessment that guarantees its sustainability from the earliest stages of planning. All environmental sustainability objectives are periodically monitored (to name a few: protection and development of urban and extra-urban ecological corridors, limitation of waste production, protection of soil and water quality, management of the anthropic presence in the area, balance between buildings and open spaces, etc). Agriculture is an integral part of this process, since it is based on organic farming methods and in according to the principles set by the Ethical Commitment Statement.

From an economic point of view, the public-private model ensured optimisation in locating and using the funds necessary for the realization of the project. Long-term sustainability is guaranteed in



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particular by biocompatible agricultural activity and specific actions aimed at promoting and enhancing the implemented short supply chains, for example the establishment of the collective label to identify the organic products from the Astino Valley, and the activation of catering, display/sales and reception points.

Concerning the **exemplary value**, the project represents a landscape management, an enhancement and transformation model that can be replicated in other protected areas. It proves to be a complete, multidimensional, effective and lasting process, a paradigmatic experience, especially concerning the debate about the potential of peri-urban areas.

The exemplary value is primarily expressed on the governance level. The care in the construction and management of the partner network, based on the involvement of various public figures in synergy with civil society, associations and companies, has led to lasting relationships and a constant commitment to the project by the various subjects. Furthermore this aspect is underlined by the legal steps that have marked the development of the project: first the *Convenzione* (Memorandum of understanding) of 2007, then the *Accordo di Programma* (Plan Agreement) of 2017, and finally contracts with farmers through the *Carta Etica* (Ethical Commitment Statement). Particularly significant is the establishment of the *Associazione produttori agricoli biologici della Valle d'Astino*, APAB (Association of Organic Farmers) as a stable expression of the virtuous economic-productive relationships based on the respect for the principles of sustainability and promotion of short supply chains.

The project has effectively reinserted this important area in a profitable relationship with the urban area and the historical city of Bergamo, giving back to Astino its whole identity dimension and its primary role within the urban ecosystem.

Concerning the **public participation**, it is particularly important that the local community, reacting to the recent degraded situation, has commendably mobilized itself, also through associations and committees, in order not to undermine the far-sighted protective restrictions imposed since the 1950s to prevent the area from being destined for improper uses and losing its public access.

The collaboration strategy between public and private culminated in 2017 with the *Accordo di Programma* underwritten by the Municipality, the *Fondazione MIA*, the *Società Val d'Astino*, the Regional Government, the Provincial Government and the *Parco dei Colli di Bergamo* (Park of the Bergamo Hills).

The decision-making phases have largely involved the institutions responsible for protection, but also the socio-cultural and environmental associations active since the 1980s for the recovery of the Astino Valley (WWF, Legambiente, Italia Nostra, Lipu), the main agricultural associations of the Park territory, the *Consorzio di bonifica per la media pianura bergamasca* (Consortium for the Reclamation of the Bergamo Central Plain); the professional associations of the province of Bergamo (architects, engineers, surveyors, agronomists), the CCIAA of Bergamo, and the Bergamo Diocese. The study activity conducted by the University of Bergamo since the early 2000s was also the basis for the recognition of the Astino and Allegrezza woods as SIC (Site of Community Importance) in 2006.

From a socio-cultural point of view, in general, the project has favoured the recovery of a deep identity-defining relationship between the city of Bergamo and the landscape of Astino. This process has been grounded on shared sustainability values, real involvement of the civil society, the cooperatives and young entrepreneurs, and social inclusion process.



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As regards the aspect of **awareness-raising**, the project has shown that it has all the features to constitute a point of reference for an effective dissemination of landscape values, from the local to the European scale.

The numerous educational and cultural activities have made Astino a privileged destination for citizens, students and inhabitants of the region. Events and seminars, such as the Université d'été (annual seminar now in its 17th edition), represent a way to disseminate the values of the European Landscape Convention and to promote advanced training for specialists in landscape management and transformation.

The soft mobility pathway network contributes to promoting healthier lifestyles, together with all the actions implemented by the project. Furthermore the project encourages the enjoyment of the landscape with a greater awareness of its multiple aspects and values, such as the economic, social, aesthetic and environmental ones.

Astino is today a treasure chest of nature, culture and biodiversity, open to broad collective enjoyment. It is a meeting and leisure area that is fully available to citizens to spend their free time in contact with nature and to associations to carry out their activities, with a particular attention to the most disadvantaged people.

For the reasons explained above, for the quality of the implemented actions – further detailed in the application form and in the attached documentation – and for the great ability to manage the complexity of all the related aspects, the candidate project has been identified as the most deserving to represent Italy for the 7th edition of the COE Landscape Award.



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