

PRESENTATION OF THE DOCTORAL RESEARCH

Title of the thesis :

Restoring the City: changing urban heritage management in shrinking small town centres. A comparison of practices between France and Italy.

This research originates from my Final Project for the Architect'State Diploma in 2016. It proposes architectural and urban solutions to revitalise the historic centre of Villefranche-de-Rouergue, a shrinking town in Aveyron. This student project was followed by an urban analysis mission commissioned by the Villefranche Town Hall, then by a Civic Service carried out in the Urban Planning Department. This operational approach is completed from 2018 by a research approach during a post-master thesis, carried out at the University HESAM in parallel with an activity of architect-urbanist. The doctoral research presented here is a continuation of these experiences revolving around the issues of heritage, urban shrinkage and towns'centres. It starts in September 2019 at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (Paris) within the Centre Jean Pépin under the direction of Emmanuèle Cunningham Sabot (University Professor at the ENS, geographer specialising in urban shrinkage) and Pierre Caye (Director of Research at the Centre Jean Pépin CNRS/ENS, philosopher specialising in heritage and architectural techniques). It is carried out on a full-time basis thanks to a contract from the ENS delivered by its doctoral school (ED540).

The shrinkage of historic centres in small and medium-sized towns in France is a highly topical issue. Complex phenomena, acting on several scales, are today endangering the urban heritage of the marginalized territories of growth areas. The challenge for our society is to ensure the transmission of a heritage threatened by the rapid mutation of these territories. For the past ten years, several revitalisation programmes (National Plan for the Requalification of Run-down Older Neighbourhoods, PNRQAD; Opération Centre-Bourgs; Action Cœur-de-Ville and Small Towns of Tomorrow) have put the fight against the ruin of urban heritage on the national agenda. However, the territorial actors still have a poor understanding of the factors of this decline and develop standardised action strategies, which are not well adapted to local contingencies. The budgets allocated by the different administrative levels (State, Regions, Departments and even municipalities) are used to treat the symptoms of the crisis rather than to solve its causes. This research therefore aims to shed light on the processes at work at the different territorial levels and to help public actors to better calibrate their urban policies and practices. The proper transmission of urban heritage is now more than ever essential to face the crises linked to collective identity, national memory and the sustainability of our territories.

In addition to these societal issues, this research responds to several scientific challenges. The analysis of the literature on urban shrinkage points a lack of knowledge about the phenomena at work in French and European towns. The omnipresence of studies on large cities and metropolitan areas since the 1990s has contributed to the marginalisation of research on rural towns. This gap is all the more important as small towns are the urban category most affected by shrinkage in France. By investigating the specific dynamics, processes and constraints of towns, this thesis aims to fill this gap. The literature on regrowth also marginalises issues related to the urban setting and particularly heritage and protected neighbourhoods. Historic heritage centres are urban objects that have not yet been fully explored by geography and urban

planning. The main current knowledge comes from sociology or morphological studies of the 1980s. Today, it seems important to update knowledge on old town centres with regard to current urban dynamics. On the other hand, the sciences of architectural and urban heritage still often do not include a territorial analysis. It is therefore at the crossroads of territorial and heritage sciences that this research is positioned, where their respective grey areas enter into dialogue.

The challenge of this thesis is also methodological. Research on urban shrinkage over the last twenty years has been based mainly on a quantitative approach (mainly in geography). While such an approach is essential to measure the extent of the phenomenon and its progression, it is limited in the local understanding of the processes underway. This is why this thesis is based on a threefold methodology using an *inductive approach*, a *mixed method* and an *international comparison*. The inductive approach favours archival work and preliminary investigation, from which the theoretical framework of analysis is formalised. The mixed method mobilises tools of quantitative geography to situate the subject of the thesis and to objectify the importance of the phenomenon on a national scale. It is also based on the analysis of qualitative data, collected through work in the departmental and municipal archives of the territories studied (urban planning documents, minutes of municipal councils, files of real estate and urban operations) and through semi-directive interviews (40 carried out so far with public actors, heritage experts and local owners). Finally, the study proceeds by comparing three contrasting rural towns, located in non-metropolitan territories: two are located on the fringes of the French Massif Central (Villefranche-de-Rouergue in Aveyron and Thiers in Puy-de-Dôme) and one Italian case is located in the Marche (Urbino). This threefold methodology is developed in order to overcome the limits of a purely quantitative approach, to better integrate the phenomena at different scales (geographical, urban and architectural) and to provide a more complex and complete understanding of the shrinkage process in historic centres.

The valorisation of this research in progress is central to my doctoral approach. In addition to interventions in national and international conferences, it is also done through publications in scientific journals and books. I am also a member of two research networks (Reviving Shrinkage Cities, Re-City, and *Penser autrement les villes moyennes*, PaViM) and of the steering committee for the establishment of a branch of the Clermont-Ferrand School of Architecture in the historic centre of Thiers. This position favours both international exchange and reflexivity on my position as an architect and researcher in relation to researchers from other disciplines and local actors.