Gairo Vecchio and Osini Vecchio in Ogliastra Province, Sardinia, 65 years after they were abandoned

“starting from what remains”

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Fig.1; front cover illustration; the Valle Pardu with Gairo Vecchio and Via XXIII Ottobre in the lower left foreground and Osini, Osini Vecchio and Ulassai at left in the distance on the opposite side of the valley. Photo: David Chandler
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Preface

“In Antro entombed. The mountain had shrugged off the little village and now only mud and stones remained”.¹

In the opening pages of the novel ‘Macerie’ the Sardinian writer Claudio Moreno set the tone for his novel, as the fictional village of ‘Antro’ is destroyed by rain generated mudslides (nubifragio). The cultural shockwaves of the loss of two villages in the Pardu Valley in 1951 continues to generate challenges well into the second decade of the 21st century.

The ruined villages Gairo Vecchio and Osini Vecchio have yet to be included in the tourist brochures for the province of Ogliastra. There are numerous archaic nuraghi, Neolithic monuments, small towns and limestone caverns to satisfy an architectural tourist.² Nature has already reclaimed most of the lower town of Osini Vecchio creating an “enjungled” place³ and Gairo Vecchio is particularly fragile because its walls are collapsing in successive seasonal phases. Nevertheless they have been both been managed as potential assets by their respective local authorities in the face of a lack of funding and many other current social priorities. These towns can, it is believed, produce positive responses amongst successive generations of visitors. They are still handled with a dignity and active sense of community through a need to keep their memory alive. The island takes pride in its material culture and incorporates these broken towns into its instinctive sense of hospitality. It is very reasonable to assert that Sardinian culture would like to be much better known. I hope this paper helps to repay some of the kindness offered during a brief visit and shines a sympathetic light on the detailed survey work (the ‘Piano Particolareggiato’) and report writing undertaken by the borough planners, engineers and geologists at Gairo Sant’Elena; Aldo Brandas, Aldo Lorrai, Bruno Piras and Gian Marco Aresu from 2004-2008 to which I can add only limited urbanist reflection, commentary and proposals from an office in Stockport, UK.

The aim of part one is to summarise the material history, culture, and morphology of the urban remains of two villages that were abandoned after 1951. As they are close neighbours only 5 km by road on either side of the Valle Pardu there will be some introductory statements that describe the differing histories and distinct identities of the two ‘borghi’. The conditions that accumulated and prevailed as the two communities persevered through the privations of two world wars form part of this research background. Further reference must inevitably make statements about them as if they were twinned or somehow similar. Their building typologies have much in common and they enjoyed many points of economic and social cooperation by the mid 19th century and shared land across the valley of the Rio Pardu so the occasional conflation has some justification. The Gairo Vecchio P.P. ‘Detailed Plan’ documents supplied by the Planning Department of Gairo Sant’Elena however provide us with a unique opportunity to present the condition of the village to the English speaking world as the primary case study.

The second part of the research requires a cautious consideration of the position of ruined villages within recent theory that seeks at times to elevate the study of urban ruin into a branch of urbanism. This can only be tangential to the case of the Sardinian villages because the destruction of

¹ Moreno, C.P. (2014); Macerie p.9; “Antro sepolta. La montagna se l’era scrollata di dosso e ora del piccolo paese rimanevano solo fango e pietre”.
² Osini and Gairo are rarely marketed as tourist destinations because their state of abandon renders the walking experience in their streets too close to that of a demolition site, certainly for the safety of children. There is also evidence of dumping, pollution and vandalism that would have demanded that these places be fenced off, restored or demolished under UK legislation.
³ Quoted from Dillon, B (2014) p.21
Gairo and Osini was foreseen from the 1880s and was even avoidable had the frequent petitions to the Italian government for intervention between the two World Wars been successful, particularly after the 1930 official order to disallow any future construction in Gairo. These two villages present a ruinscape derived from isolation and poverty and demonstrate the limitations of an agricultural way of life that would have very probably continued to generate a quota of emigration and depopulation, as so many parts of Europe also experienced, into the second half of the 20th century. Islands such as Sardinia and Sicily, with high seismic activity, had already developed certain strategies for urban crisis rebuilding. As far back as 1693 forty towns in eastern Sicily were destroyed by earthquakes; “where, after the inevitable disaster should a city be rebuilt? How should it be designed to avoid future disasters?”

Part two discusses the post war context; “start from what remains” and is intended to reflect Elena Pirazzoli’s recent research on the memorial and philosophical context generated by the urban destruction of post war European cities through to the fall of the Berlin Wall. This research was taken further in her section of the Venice Biennale in 2014 that considered architecture that memorialises the urbs oblivionalis. In the Palazzo Altemps Exhibition ‘La Forza delle Rovine’ the term “Forza” carries connotations of a political movement, or agenda. The exhibition placed ruins, restorations and re-interpretation inside a survey of artefacts ranging from the carved earthquake reliefs of first century Pompeii to the photography products generated by conflict in the Ukraine.

Emerging from this body of theory the research attempts to suggest the possibility of plausible urbanist intervention in the conditions of the two Sardinian villages and their specialised circumstances. Much of this work has already been undertaken with exemplary care by the respective planning sections of Osini and Gairo Sant’Elena authorities from 2008. This is especially the case of Gairo Vecchio with its extensive campaign of digitised measurement and geomorphological survey, part of which is presented for the first time in this paper. The ruins of Gairo and Osini are currently attracting a variety of mostly positive attention as a new generation regards them with affection as they are preserved as a locus of family, archaeology and civic memory struggling with inevitable “drosscape” morphology.

The valley where Osini and Gairo are located has Ulassai as its third town. This was the focus of a totally unexpected and original urbanist community performance event that should be better known. On 8 Sept 1981 Maria Lai with family connections at Ulassai persuaded the mayor and syndics of her town to permit an urban textile ribbon “weaving” event (in place of a war memorial) that still resonates through the cultural history and has contributed substantially to its prosperity and visitor offer. Economically productive memorialising investment continues there 35 years later despite the very remote location of Ulassai. Her inspirational achievement encouraged my specific close study painting as a record of a Gairo street to contribute to the corpus of memorialisation artefacts uploaded to social media platforms. Mostly these offer tourist responses to the ruins in photography and film formats, mostly lacking captions or commentary although there are some scrapbook resources which by local residents, which I have credited.

In part two I also review some ongoing urbanist solutions and tentative proposals for the future presentation and interpretation of these two uninhabitable villages. As the infrastructure was never

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4 Tobriner, S.1982, p.11
5 An interview with Roberto Zancan and Elena Pirazzoli at the 14th International Architecture Exhibition (Monditalia section 2014: Urbs Oblivionalis. Urban Spaces and Terrorism in Italy) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyaYIC1haSM]
6 Dillon, B (2014) p.41
put in place their current circumstances are undermined by the deficiencies of the past. They are still exposed to future natural weather events that threaten damage to the remaining fabric and consign them to the itinerary of the ‘ghost towns’; paesi fantasmi. Certainly not unique to the island, there are many other abandoned villages in Sardinia.

My conclusion remains aware of the legacy of official neglect since the 1880s, but praises the emerging community intelligence and resourcefulness of the two towns, driven by visionary academics and individuals in conjunction with highly committed and professional national and local authority managers and a loyal press. There is much left to attempt in rebuilding the identities of these abandoned places but some outstanding good practice can be brought to bear on their current conditions (despite the improbable factor of any permanent human reoccupation). My working title for this paper had originally included a proposal to investigate “unbuilding townscape” in the Valle Pardu context; my final illustration’ represents the validity of that term, in graphic form.

I am grateful to Seven Architecture, Manchester for a travel grant that supported this work. Eamonn Canniffe at Manchester School of Architecture, for his impeccable sense of priority, Ingegneri Mauro de Mortas at the Comune di Gairo Sant’Elena whose loan of the digital archive of survey documents and Giuseppe Cabizzosu at the Biblioteca Comunale at Ulassai who provided invaluable local links between the five towns; Ulassai, Osini, Osini Vecchio, Gairo Sant’Elena and Gairo Vecchio. His publishing achievements are of fundamental importance to the archive of photographic and social memories of this endlessly interesting part of Ogliastra province.

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7 Fig.72 below
8 Cabizzosu, G. 2014. Also; La Nuova. Edizione Nuoro. 4 July 2015
Fig. 2: Sardinia. Ogliastra province. The valley of the Rio Pardu. The locations of the ‘paesi duplice’ or twin towns of Osini Nuovo and Vecchio and Gairo (ruderi) and Gairo S.Elena, the administrative centre for some of the dispersed residents of the original town. Note the prominent fringe of limestone cliffs that end at Gairo “Taquisara” at the upper left hand corner of the map. Source: Melelli, A., (1997) p.453

In 1217 a villa “d’Osono”\(^{10}\) is mentioned in documents, and by 1288 Osini became a Pisan dominion. In 1573 -74 a “subsidio de galeras” levied on the inhabitants as a galley tax to defend the island against the threat of the Turks\(^{11}\). In 1720 the town was ceded to the House of Savoy. On 12 May 1838 feudal dominion was lifted by Carlo Alberto. Land reform arrived in 1849 when a “foglio d’unione” was drawn up uniting local boundary sectors. In 1891 a railway was approved in a council meeting.

The town had the benefit of three natural springs as the extract from the important census from 1832 - 1848 described\(^{12}\). These percolated through the limestone cliffs behind the town. The geophysical core data from Gairo in 2004 below has since confirmed the permeable structure of both these valley slopes. The same cliffs were to channel rainwater directly onto the town in 1951, accelerating the force of the flow underground and over the surface of the dry schists.

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\(^{10}\) MURGIA, S. (2005) p.11

\(^{11}\) MURGIA, S. (2005) p.21

\(^{12}\) Dizionario Angius-Casalis 1832-1848 “In the Osinese area there are a great number of springs whose waters are reputed to be of great benefit and some praised as restorative. Inside the settlement three streams are open for the use of the population; one “Su Riu deis Prunas” the other “Funtanedda” and the third;“Murai”. In the summer their temperature is such that they compare with water ices and refresh the lips of any who are tired and hot...
Gairo Vecchio

The town is situated at 520 metres above sea level. The etymology of the name has attracted a number of evocative readings. Giovanni Lilliu placed it in the 12th century as Galillium with its links to the historical Saint George, the eponymous church above the town.

1322 there is a documentary reference to a “Villa Gayro”. In 1316 Gairo is recognised officially on the census of Pisa. Gairo Vecchio is described in the census data from 1832-1848; “This village is comprised of 250 houses. The roads are uneven and there are 245 families, 1100 souls. Of this population around 260 are employed in agriculture, 80 as shepherds, and a few others in common jobs.” Of interest is the detail provided under the heading, “Acque”. The landscape is praised for the variety of its springs as was Osini. Mention that in the rainy season the current of the river prevents fording and there were two water powered mills. Also a wooden bridge built at the expense of the comune was destroyed by winter floods more than once. “It often rains there” It mentions the practice of “arbonare” to enrich the soil. This was an archaic tradition of stubble burning (il debbio) that had origins from at least the 4th century BCE. This process could occasionally produce risks of damage to other property. However when combined with very high rainfall levels the conditions for catastrophic soil movement could be unintentionally generated; “the loss of traditional farming methods.....contribute to hydraulic disruption, soil erosion and

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15 Dizionario Angius-Casalis 1832-1848. Ilisso Edizioni, Nuoro 2006. p.464
desertification”\textsuperscript{18}. The loss of tree cover is still evident on the upper slopes above both towns where topsoil reveals tracts of bare rock.

Fig. 8; ‘Il debbio’; stubble burning near Gairo Sant’Elena, probably 1970s

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2K7pUdY7eK8\#t=130.0073607

In one of the earliest images of Gairo Vecchio the village appears in the distance on the slope of the Rio Pardu in 1904 in a photograph of Ulassai\textsuperscript{19}, a ‘borgo’ that would have been judged to have been as important as Gairo. Both communities shared similar struggles for transport and economic survival. Two world wars were awaiting the families of these little towns. But so was the menace of catastrophic autumnal precipitation that would probably affect every generation at least once in a lifetime. Combined with some seismic activities and landslides that destroyed roads in adjoining areas, this generated a stoic self-sufficiency and resourcefulness within these communities. In 1904 the 1880 \textit{nubifragio} would have been a recent memory. Gairo had suffered so badly in that storm that it required outside assistance. Already transfers to other communities or emigration was accepted and population dispersal was underway by the start of the twentieth century.

Figs. 9 +10; left; Ulassai from Mount Tisiddu. The Valley of the Rio Pardu is seen clearly. Gairo Vecchio circled in red and Osini in yellow. Anon. 1904

Photo: David Chandler

In 1880 the story of the soil and flooding problems of Gairo enters the official records. Referred to by Moretti\textsuperscript{20} as landslides; “franne” but in fact, mudslides.\textsuperscript{21} By 1904 there was a need for special expenditure on local roads after erosion by torrents and rivers and in 1907 money was voted to arrest the earth slips induced by heavy rainfall.

\textsuperscript{18} Lai, F. (2005) p.89
\textsuperscript{19} Cabizzosu, G. (2014) vol.I, p.19
\textsuperscript{20} Moretti A. (1953)
By 1908 some evidence of population dispersal and emigration emerges as inhabitants transfer to other towns new; even Basilicata and Calabria on mainland Italy and further afield by 1919. By 1928 studies were undertaken to find an infrastructure remedy for the mudslides. This is noted as a “pessimistic document”; important conclusions were drawn but little was done. Another flood occurred in March 1927. This initiated population transfers in the direction of Genneua. These rains affected the railway line and interrupted travel between Taquisara and Baccu Nieddu. By 1928 fifteen families had left Gairo.

Both towns had developed organic geomorphological plans that had evolved across the valley gradients. A key date is 1930 when both Gairo and Osini are discussed in the surveys undertaken by the local surveyor engineer Attilio Moretti to create channels to divert water away from the villages. It is in this year that there is an official ban on future building at Gairo and a decision is taken to demolish dangerous houses. Gairo Taquisara is recommended as a possible solution to rehousing. In 1934 engineers from Cagliari and Nuoro established a canal channel above the town. This proved inadequate to the next very heavy flood in Gairo 17-19 October 1940. Ten families had to be rehoused. A further 16 families later moved up the mountain to Funtana de Sant’Elëni (Gairo Sant’Elena).

**October 1951 and its aftermath**

“Un diavolo senza freno”.22 Over the period from 14-19 October 1951, after an exceptionally dry summer,23 Gairo and its neighbours were subjected to cyclone Cleopatra, depositing over four metres of rainfall, destroying 90 houses and making 95 families homeless. These people found temporary shelter in neighbours’ houses. The complete transfer of the town was not immediately discussed but by 1952 the legal framework was put in place to rebuild new communities. There is newsreel documentation made from 1951 and poignant interviews with citizens who describe their suffering.24 This documents the progress of the construction of the new town of Gairo Sant’Elena as well as some of the protests that took place at the slow pace of reconstruction.

![Figs. 11 + 12; Gairo Vecchio; Vicolo di Sopra and Via XXIII Ottobre in 1954 from a RAI documentary still.25 (left) and in the same area in September 2015 (right). The forces of quarrying and collapse combined with unchecked vegetation.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3pgU1FatIo&list=PLraQolpS3sF5jYzE0YzQ9VQ0-f8v9I3K9)

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22 “An unstoppable devil” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3pgU1FatIo&list=PLraQolpS3sF5jYzE0YzQ9VQ0-f8v9I3K9
23 MURGIA, A. 2006; on Tuesday 15 October 150 million Lire had just been voted by the Unione Sarda to assist with the damage to agriculture on the island due to the summer drought.
24 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3pgU1FatIo
25 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3pgU1FatIo
In 1957 work is undertaken to reforest the Rio Pardu valley. Rainwater defences proposed by Moretti were not built despite the return of more heavy rains. In the meanwhile some houses were propped up, others demolished and wooden safety rails were inserted into open doorways.

Fig.13; Gairo Vecchio; a resettlement protest c.1961; “After 10 years; time to rebuild our village”
Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNQi7wZutTM

From 1966-9 there is a complete transfer of inhabitants from Osini and Gairo with state legislation to enact this at a cost of 3.500.000 lire. Further subsidies were voted for the 1951-53 and 58-60 disasters. In 1973 7.000.000 lire was voted to restore part of nearby Cardedu because it had also become a virtual Gairo Vecchio resettlement community.

From 1980 R.A.d.S. (Regione Autonoma della Sardegna) adopted plans to complete the urbanisation of the new centres that replaced the lost villages and in 1984 a project sum of 20 billion lire was voted to organise a consolidation of the landscape. This seems to have produced minimal results while the period 1978-1998 saw alleged corruption and quarrying of materials from Gairo and Osini (partly to build new holiday villages on the coast). It is mostly after the millennium that positive steps were taken to re-evaluate Gairo Vecchio and to channel water away from the town. From 2004-2008 a comprehensive survey and mapping of Gairo Vecchio was undertaken combined with an extensive series of statutes intended to control the future use and abuse of the village site and its road side footprint. In 2015 transfer of outstanding leases and claims were settled for a nominal one Euro26 and the town was transferred to public ownership. This effectively created an opportunity for new development, within the strict conservation guidelines agreed in 2008. Nevertheless the verdict of the geological survey of 2004 had been very pessimistic;

“...”The old town has been gradually abandoned and from the end of the 1970s became completely uninhabited. In the period of the last ten years the careless treatment, vandalism, removal of building materials and the siting of a public waste tip has brought about a complete state of environmental and architectural desolation...”27

Fig.14; dumping near Spirito Santo continues, September 2015 Photo. David Chandler

The new town of Gairo Sant’Elena (which can be viewed in full on digital map platforms) only a component of the three town “dispersal” of the population of Gairo Vecchio, is given a similarly negative verdict. The reconstruction of the new town, condemned as; “over hasty, insufficient, inadequate and unfinished” precipitated two more “negative” consequences; the first result was that the “monotonous and repetitive plan” had generated a “depersonalised and alienating village” deprived of “any trace of connectivity and urban relationship” with the original historical centre28.

26 La Nuova (Nuoro). 9 September 2015
27 P.P. Relazione 2004, p.17
28 A problem of signal importance and possibly the starting point for all future initiatives. The hurried but divisive planning vision of 1954 generated by the calamity of 1951 overlooked a master plan for the integration
The second consequence was the decision to partially transfer the population of Gairo Vecchio to the coastal plain of Cardedu.\(^\text{29}\) The residents had been given the opportunity to build houses “anywhere” in the territory with state subsidies which generated the process of depopulation of other small mountain villages which today “is being desperately discouraged”.\(^\text{30}\)

**Gairo Vecchio: geological conditions from the P.P.**

In a geological survey undertaken by the planning department of Gairo Sant’Elena in 2004 the subdivision of the urban area of Gairo Vecchio into different zone qualities of “development potential” was gained by gauging the relevant geological, geomorphological and hydrological characteristics. Despite being inside the Hg3 (high risk) category, measures such as ordinary maintenance, tidying and improvement and prevention of landslides are permitted under the local legislation.

Zone 1 (green) pertaining to the area of medium low risk dominated by washed down schists mostly without soil cover with good substructure and avoided by river courses and streams. These areas have been identified as suitable for limited recuperation and re-use.

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\(^{29}\) Cardedu is later described as “colonised” by entire Gairo families who had to abandon their town; Cugudda, L. 2015. La Nuova. Edizione Nuoro. 9.9.2015


of the two centres at Gairo. This might be simply solved by a cable car from the upper to the lower town, serving hikers and tourists.

\(^{31}\) P.P. 2004 Elaborato C.1 p.20
Zone 2 (red) pertaining to the areas covered with detritus and washed down schists with medium high risk of landslides divided by water courses and penetrated by springs. The cover is therefore not homogenous and prone to small landslides. This zone requires reforestation and drainage for infrastructure and topsoil reinforcement.

Zone 3 (purple) pertaining to the area of previously authorised mixed waste dumping across an area of 4500 square metres. Material had built up over 20 years from 1978 – 1998 comprising residential and builders’ waste landfill. Because of the failure of the regulations some toxic and poisonous substances may have been deposited in this zone. Zone 3 requires work to clean up the waste and further efforts to return it to environmental norms.

The future of the site is also determined by the structure and composition of the soils and the risk of landslide on the gradients as they are undermined by water. The area of Gairo Vecchio is characterised by an assortment of lithosoils, cristalline schist rocks, quartzite and brown earth.

Fig.16; map of soil zones in the area of the Rio Pardu. Gairo ringed.


Fig.17; landslide risk east of the Rio Pardu. Gairo Vecchio (circled) “high risk; Hg3” Purple; Hg.4; “extreme risk”. P.P.R. 2008. Section 5.6, p.13

The topsoil has a covering of oak which has been over cultivated so that in places the bedrock emerges from the landscape. The palaeozoic schists soften the landscape and limit some erosive agencies. Areas had been set aside for viticulture, almonds, olives and cereal crops but most have been abandoned. There are also areas used for pasture which is regarded as a way of avoiding fire;[^32] still a genuine threat to this type of landscape.

[^32]: A brushwood fire recently broke out in Osini Vecchio. 13 May 2015
Limestone-dolostone mountains form the bedrock and have produced limestone stacks called “tacchi” (heels) in this area. Subterranean caverns are numerous and so are rock falls which have resulted in a series of boulder nets along the side of certain cliffside roads at Ulassai, in particular.

Figs. 18 + 19; Gairo Vecchio. P.P. Geophysical surveys 2004. At the North West end of Via Roma (sample site S4) soil core samples were drilled and illustrated to a depth of 15 metres. Fig 20; The visual demonstration of the friable nature of these samples is very evident in the three trays (cassette) of samples that were produced by the bores\(^{33}\).

Gairo Vecchio: building typologies

Public Buildings

Public buildings did not exist at Gairo Vecchio; the town hall, the post office, the police barracks, the doctor’s clinic, and the little sections of the primary schools were accommodated in rented private properties\(^{34}\). Two churches existed; Cresiedda and Cresia Manna and the parish house (see pp.21-22 below).

Domestic structures

House typologies are surprisingly varied; within each block houses differ from each other with small individual variations. The houses are usually located between two roads one on an upper terrace and one below it. In the lower houses the room spaces are often adapted to be cellars, storage and for domestic animals. In the upper dwellings the house could be of one or two floors. The buildings are nearly always terraced on these gradients. A typical house consisted of a kitchen sa cogina, a bedroom, sa domu de lettu and an attic, s’istassu. From the outside one entered directly into the kitchen, which led upstairs to the bedroom, from which, in turn, usually by a ladder one could gain access to an attic, that overlooked the bedroom and a terrace, occasionally. Behind the attic there was s’errili where the waters from the roof drained downwards. This area was set up as a lavatory as there was no sewerage infrastructure. The attic had a very low roof and served as a girls’ bedroom and part larder. The kitchen was a focus of women’s day work and the room where boys often slept on the floor mats in the centre of the room with their feet towards the fireplace. In these kitchen areas sometimes domestic animals were kept; a pig, near an oven in the corner, chickens and a donkey and a goat who at night was tied to a millstone placed opposite the kitchen stove angle.

\(^{33}\) P.P. Elaborato C2 2004, p.18
\(^{34}\) CdGSE. Elaborato A (2008) 13-22
Urban life

Evidence for way of life in the decades prior to the catastrophe of 1951 is found in D.H. Lawrence’s 1921 “Sea and Sardinia”. Much of the narrative centres on the availability of rail and public bus travel once he leaves the levels north of Cagliari. Roads emerge as the most important urban environments in villages as they function as public spaces in the absence of a piazza. Roads also frame the frequent religious processions that provide social rituals. He meets an aspiring emigrant, and a population harbouring resentment generated by Italian military fortunes in the First World War. The winter cold penetrates the poor hotels of the central region, making the communal hearth a continuous focus. The need for daily food and fuel provision seems to reflect a pattern that had been recorded in earlier 19th century accounts of village agricultural cycles. Village roads are unmade and children are still without shoes in the 1930s.

Fig 20; left; youth corps on the steps in front of the Post Office on Via IV Novembre c. 1941
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNQj7wZutTM  Fig. 21; right; Via IV Novembre, September 2015.
Photo; David Chandler

Fig 22; Left. Gairo Vecchio; The street as processional space. Festa della Madonna di Buoncammino circa 1940
Source; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNQj7wZutTM

Fig 23; Right. Gairo Vecchio; Spirito Santo bell housing with local citizens circa late 1940s Source; P.P. 8.3.2008 (see also fig.43 below)
Gairo Vecchio; architecture and typology: four case studies

Gairo Vecchio. Case Study 1; Insula 2, dwelling 1 in the historical centre. P.P. Elaborato 8.3.3 pp.8 -9

Some preliminary notes on a gradient $x$-$z$-$y$ and some other building functions

David Chandler

Fig 24. Gairo Vecchio; field study notes of dwellings 1-5, Sept. 2015. The $x$ marks the collapsed house on Via Roma

Fig 25 right; measured plan of the western section of the village denoted S1-S3 zone (comparto) 3, insula 2 by the P.P. 2008.8.3.3. Flat roof in green.
Figs 26 + 27; Gairo Vecchio: The 2 dwellings on Via IV Novembre illustrated in close detail from the P.P. Elaborato 8.3.3, insula 2, p.8 surveys and a photograph of the collapsed S1 dwelling. Photo: David Chandler.

Figs 28 + 29; Gairo Vecchio. Dwellings V2 and V1. Left; photo Gairo P.P.Insula 2 p.8, 2008. Right; The same block in Sept. 2015. The crack in the full height wall reveals a weakness of local stone construction traditions. Photo; David Chandler

Fig. 30; Gairo Vecchio P.P. Insula 2 from Via IV Novembre facing East. Cross section elevation with Via Roma on the lower terrace at right.
Figs. 31 + 32; 2008 P.P. roofs indicated on dwellings S2 and S1 at 4. Both are absent. Below; elevation from the same P.P. source. Fig 33; right; Via XXIII Ottobre with S2 looking towards Via IV Novembre. Photo: David Chandler. This was selected as a subject of an urbanist painting because it is very fragile. (See part 2 below).

Figs 34 + 35; The dwelling (S2, V2; ‘The House of the Broken Stair’) on Via XXIII Ottobre remains an important landmark in the surviving silhouette of Gairo vecchio as it rises over ten metres to 3 storeys, basement and an attic. It has lost its roof tiles. The stairs have been hammered away as the floors are dangerous. Its walls have traces of original pigment but the pavements are covered with schists and topsoils invaded by vegetation. A tiled roof abutted a concrete flat roof at dwelling V1 which would have offered views of the valley from the structure (4) on Via Roma.

Fig 36; right; photograph of a flat roof balcony in use at Gairo Vecchio. Probably 1930s. Source: Fausto Mulas. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2K7pUdY7eK8#t=130.0073607

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Photographs taken inside the private dwellings at Gairo or Osini are extremely rare. This document is exceptional as the place and angle are close to an unspecified west facing location, similar to Via Roma.
Gairo Vecchio. Case Study 3: Via Roma; typologies from the historical village centre

Figs 37 + 38; Above; Gairo Vecchio 2008 P.P. survey elevations of Via Roma and detail of dwellings 2-5.

Fig 39; below; urban sketch of the same group, September 2015.

David Chandler
Case Study 4: Gairo Vecchio: two churches

1. Sant’Elena (Cresia Manna) every summer the focus of a mass and celebrations that attract the faithful and tourists. Fully restored, it is vital to the future dignity and identity of the town. The Parish churches of Gairo and Osini Vecchio remain active cultural centres and repositories of community memory. This structure remains an important part of community life for Gairo Sant’Elena and is probably the only point of continuing contact between the paesi duplici.
2. Spirito Santo (Cresiedda), from the 15th century probably represented the first urban nucleus of Gairo. (Destroyed 1951)

Fig. 42; Gairo Vecchio. P.P. 2008 cross section elevation annotated with references to the piers, half pipe terracotta roof tiles, travertine chancel arch, brick pavement and walling in local stone. Further reconstructions were supplied as collaged graphics see fig. 43 below, indicative of the meticulous quality of record in the 2008 surveys for the Piano Particolareggiato. The terraced platform occupied by the ruined church is probably the best site for a modest new community development and conference space, fitting the footprint of Spirito Santo.

Reconstruction; P.P. 2008. 8.3.2.

Materials

The P.P. structures surveys (schede unità edilizie) generate a standard chart of fifteen criteria of the material condition of each dwelling in the village which is also presented in plan and elevation with a photograph.36 The documents present an audit of the physical state of each building in 2008 and a second column compiled by the engineers, lists interventions and building remedies required. The work by the surveyors in this respect emerges as a meticulous, detailed resource designed to provide a prompt response to planning inquiries from developers and a genuine attempt to audit the condition of the extant remains to account for further collapses and unauthorised quarrying. It also provides an insight into construction techniques and building typologies in this area of Ogliastra province until 1930 when further constructions were forbidden at Gairo. There are also summary details of the postal address, owner (usually listed as Comune di Gairo) and the taxable status of the property. Legal status and building dates are omitted. Each chart helps to reconstruct the abundance of “assente” or missing materials such as granite quoins, local stone, wrought iron balconies, copper gutters, roof tiles, wooden joists and the surviving painted plaster walls. At the base of each survey page is a six row summary of the priorities for the target structure which is answered with a tick box.

36 See Appendix C
for the specific restoration requirements, the last being the total “demolition and reconstruction
without changing the building volume.”

Elsewhere in both villages the use of poured concrete structures is evident, especially on
roofs, interior piers, stairs and footpaths. Its structural performance in 1951 in the context
of local stone wall construction and the geological fragility of the terrain turned these
into hazardous ballistic masses.

Fig 44; Gairo Vecchio: concrete pads for flat roofs.
c.1930
Source:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNQj7wZutTM

Figs. 45 + 46; Gairo Vecchio; Via IV Novembre in September 2015 (P.P.insula 1) as a rubble filled piazza with a
detail of masonry fragments hanging from a pier at right revealing the uneven stone construction of the wall.
The traditional blue paint of the interior walls is still visible.
Drawing and photo; David Chandler

Figs.47 + 48; Gairo Vecchio; footpath access concrete bridge across a culvert from 1930s and the same today.
Photo David Chandler Source; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNQj7wZutTM

37 “demolizione e ricostruzione senza aumento di volume” There was no evidence at Gairo Vecchio of this
measure, but could be part of a curatorial approach to the structures
Ullassai: an urban paradigm

Ullassai has been able to benefit from its escape from the cataclysm of 1951 and has spread in the shadow if its surrounding mountains to become prosperous and a hub for tourism that is mostly venture based but equally authentically cultural with its local nuraghi and Maria Lai foundation. Ullassai retains extensive evidence of the 19th and 20th century building types that are currently now in crisis in Gairo and Osini. Mostly undergoing architect conversion and estate agency marketing. However, ambitious residential development has transformed the village into a town and offers a potent demonstration of the lost futures of Osini and Gairo Vecchio. There are some explicit parallels that should be made between the building typologies of the three towns as Ullassai continues to prosper as an urban bellwether, mostly conserving many original building types inside the restricted footprint of its urban boundaries.

*Fig.49; Ullassai looking north from the site of the Fondazione Stazione dell’Arte.*
Photo. David Chandler 2015

*Figs.50 + 51; at left a building “no.1” from Gairo Vecchio insula 8 compared with a similar structure on a steep road junction of the SP11 and Via Venezia in Ullassai*
PART 2: STARTING FROM WHAT REMAINS; URBANIST APPROACHES TO RUINS IN THE OGLIASTRA CONTEXT

Fig. 52; ‘rovine’: ruins. Three storeys of debris hanging inside a house in Gairo Vecchio. The “building reverting to the materials of its construction”38

Photo: David Chandler

38 Pirazzoli, E. p121
Post war urban ruin theory in Europe

In her chapter ‘Architecture and Survival’ Elena Pirazzoli introduces the poetics of ruins with a long extract from The Silent Angel by Heinrich Boll written 1949-51. He mentions the power of the blue sky breaking through the roof spaces. Pirazzoli continues to discuss the important distinction between “rovine”; ruins and “macerie”; here translated as debris or rubble. An urban environment destroyed by aerial bombardment in World War II was referred to as a rubble field; “Trummerfeld”. This was made famous in the Rossellini Film ‘Germany Year Zero’ where it becomes a metaphor for alienation, exclusion and suicide. These landscapes of devastation had such a profound formative impact on the young Anselm Kiefer whose tilting concrete towers, ‘La Ribotte’ 1993-2007, in his studio field at Barjac seem to reconstruct the post-conflict state of urban decay. An architecture of ruin but also the psychological condition of ‘ruinenlust’. This is best understood as manifesto and a distinct artistic subject area that has some claim to being a genre.

Ruins had held neo-Romantic connotations, “something of cliché” until the technology and morality of twentieth century warfare demonstrated its power to reduce towns to ruinscapes. The accusatory “Trummerfeld” has fundamentally changed the semiology of the post Romantic ruin. This was anticipated in the writing of Georg Simmel in 1909 in Die Ruine. The romantic structures of ruins had prompted reflections on time and peace, of the reversion of materials back to the good Mother Earth. But from 1945 ruins no longer return us to the past but to the present. From Diderot’s poetry of ruins, evocative fragments of once great civilizations, the subjects of contemplation and melancholy, emerged the 20th century power of annihilation where even the sky, as the sheltering heavenly canopy provided by Divine protection, could be forever ruptured.

This is also the starting point of ‘Paesaggi di rovine nelle arti figurative del novecento’ which endows ruins with a political power, evidence of enduring and changing meanings generated by fragments of antiquity.

The painter Mario Mafai worked on his series of ‘Demolizioni’ including a study of the WWII bombed basilica of San Lorenzo in Rome. This painting presents an almost ingenuous impressionist handling of the basilica with its timber centering open to the surrounding landscape, prefiguring a type of modernism that would see steel and glass structures inserted into the heritage structures of the Vatican or Capitoline Museums. An acceptance of a new aesthetic of architectural grafting and an appreciation of functional public structures set in train definitively by the 1980s.

The theme is given a surrealist interpretation in the painting ‘Simeon the Stylite’ by Carel Willink (1939). Using the figure of the Syrian Saint as a vehicle for a self-portrait with cities in flames in the distance and an ominous black sky over the ruins of a temple platform. The image anticipates the media images of the recent destruction of heritage sites in Syria. The artist creates a document that offers a chilling millenarian narrative for twentieth century urban society.

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39 Pirazzoli, E. (2010) p.120
40 The term informs the Tate Gallery ‘Ruin Lust’ 2014 exhibition
41 Benincasa, F. (2015) offers a good survey of Ruin Film
42 Dillon B (2014) p.12
46 Fortuna,D.(2015); Paesaggi di rovine nelle arti figurative del novecento P.90
47 Fortuna,D.(2015); P.96, fig.4
More directly a parallel to the Sardinian case studies is the colossal unfinished land art structure devised by Alberto Burri; ‘Il Grande Cretto’ formed from the rubble and debris of Gibellina Vecchia in the province of Trapani, Sicily after an earthquake destroyed the village in 1968. The urban plan is mapped out in a series of concrete pads that offer a total surface of 300 x 400 metres, 1.60m. high. These conform to the urban pattern of the town and create colossal necropolis-like oversized tomb slabs set between grids of streets, redolent of an Etruscan cemetery.48

![Image](http://www.alfiogarozzo.it/editorial/categoria-viaggi/sicilia-gibellina/gibellina-vecchia-il-cretto-di-burri-7421.jpg)

**Fig. 53; Sicily: Gibellina Vecchia. ‘Il Grande Cretto’. Source; [http://www.alfiogarozzo.it/editorial/categoria-viaggi/sicilia-gibellina/gibellina-vecchia-il-cretto-di-burri-7421.jpg](http://www.alfiogarozzo.it/editorial/categoria-viaggi/sicilia-gibellina/gibellina-vecchia-il-cretto-di-burri-7421.jpg)**

The material relics of the destroyed village that stand as a permanent ideological gesture of outrage is Oradour-sur-Glane, the site of a staggering Nazi atrocity. As with the Sardinian villages the element of time and erosion is significantly more rapid on the surfaces of unroofed walls than might have been expected.49 Ironically, the French town is in need of reconstruction to consolidate its ruined morphology, in a process that is similar to heritage interventions at Pompeii. Other war memorial towns such as Belchite in Spain continue to attract ideological desecration and vandalism as a result of the persistence of unsettled political scores. The recreational potential of these places is offered as an opportunity in an index of “dark tourism”. This provides a reasonable definition of the ‘**Sardinia Abbandonata**’50 website that catalogues an itinerary of urban and architectural failure of state and private investment in Sardinia. The abandoned fragments present, at times, very close parallels with the rural villages of the Pardu valley, others are quite extraordinary; a full height dam, and entire holiday village projects. Without doubt there are opportunities for visual and cultural pleasure in these structures because film and photography continue to generate creative product

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48 The 6th century BCE Necropoli del Crocifisso di Tufo at Orvieto, for example
50 [http://www.sardegnaabbandonata.it/category/paesi-fantasma](http://www.sardegnaabbandonata.it/category/paesi-fantasma)
from their existence. Possibly risking reversion to the “elegiac”\textsuperscript{51} Romantic paradigm of the type produced by Duncan Wylie in his large canvases of modernist architectural ruins with their twisted structural steel frameworks. In paintings such as ‘Time Piece’ 2010, ‘State House’ 2010 and ‘Light Pool’ 2012, deep ruinous spaces, half demolished, present colossal structures hanging precariously, as if catching their breath, awaiting the next impact of the wrecking ball. Celebrating the destruction of spaces that mattered to their occupants filtered with a glaze of choking dust, speared with crossing shafts of sunlight; lyrical because of their itemised chaos. A more sinister sense of risk of poisonous ruined places is found in “Atomgrad (Nature Abhors a Vacuum)”\textsuperscript{52} 2013 by Jane and Louise Wilson at Pripyat, the Chernobyl workers’ town. The “Toxic Camera”\textsuperscript{52} actually records the radiation polluted 35mm Konvas Avtomat camera that was put beyond use as a result of the early meltdown phase of the nuclear reactor. A dying town may continue to generate human casualties if not curated and protected.

The role of the photographic representation creates a distinct type of image and remains the most important format for the mediation of this aspect of urbanism. The photographic record of Gairo and Osini is, surprisingly, the record of active places. A topos that is subject to movement, however miniscule. The lens records the process of a type of meticulous “unbuilding”; an urban autumn, as leaves of concrete floors dangle by a few steel cables ready to fall or drag down their supporting walls. One such example is ‘Spider’; a digital photo print, where the concrete becomes an insect trying to climb a wall but is precipitating its destruction. Steel wires like water channels rain down from a blue frame scratching graffiti scrawled by a blind creature.

\textbf{Fig. 54; David Chandler; ‘Spider’. 2015. Digital photo print}  
\textit{Photo: David Chandler}

\textsuperscript{51} http://www.creativetourist.com/articles/art/manchester/jane-and-louise-wilson-at-the-whitworth-homage-to-chernobyl/  
\textsuperscript{52} http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/oct/22/jane-and-louise-wilson-exhibition
Other contextual representations of ruins have created studio albums for a number of prestigious photographers and their art galleries. More controversial, possibly, is the ruin punk representation of derelict structures for recent design marketing by Moooi; ‘The Unexpected Welcome’ in Milan

Two creative responses to urban ruin:

*Fig. 55; left; Massimo Listri’s poster for the Milan 2016 Moooi design showcase. Source; [https://pbs.twimg.com/media/CeaDQ2WWwAEyPPN.jpg](https://pbs.twimg.com/media/CeaDQ2WWwAEyPPN.jpg)*

*Fig. 56; right; Gaza; sculptures by Eyad Sabbah recalling the monochrome colours of victims trapped in the buildings Source; REUTERS/Mohammed Salem*

**The case of Maria Lai at Ulassai; a utopian event**

*Fig. 57; Maria Lai, ‘Legarsi alla montagna’, 1981. Photo image with marker pen and thread. Source; Domusweb*

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After her matriculation at Rome, Maria Lai, (b. Ulassai 1919) developed her creative vision at the studio of Arturo Martini at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Venice. Her Sardinian identity and voice emerged through a series of poetry filled artist’s books. At her instigation, the inhabitants of Ulassai participated in an improbable urban performance 8 September 1981. The motifs and metaphors of the landscape, a blue ribbon and the textile loom and thread that is central to local textiles, all harnessed by the political willpower she used to persuade the authorities and citizens of Ulassai to share a continuous pale blue ribbon across their windows and doors, down entire streets that would eventually be taken up above the town by expert climbers to the mountain that overshadows it so that they might literally see their community re-enact a local legend and be “tied to the mountain”. The sheer cliff of the rock face became, for Maria, the canvas to which the precipitous streets of the town, like a “found object”, would be “stitched”.56 Mari Lai’s iconic image (Fig.57) generates an image of a town woven using the force of coloured light and pigment as much as with the actual recycled blue denim ribbon used in 1981 and is a utopian response to the village as an “urban canvas”. Ambiguous, the town of Ulassai appears as if it had also become a ‘paese fantasma’. The event was given urban permanence subsequently by a series of secular “stations” connected through Ulassai and its local roads as a form of open air museum (fig.58). Her life’s work is now curated at the converted railway station at Ulassai, the ‘Fondazione Stazione dell’Arte’ endowed as a focus for conferences and related exhibitions.57 A nearby textile factory continues to produce her designs under license.58 Gairo Vecchio, in particular, would benefit from a version of a ‘percorso’ and open air museum itinerary to fix certain key landmarks into cultural memory.

Figs. 58-60; Ulassai; Maria Lai Open Air Museum. Left; the visitor itinerary sign with eleven stations to be followed like a walking “thread”. Centre; station no.7; ‘Il Telaio Soffitto’ (the ceiling weaver); detail of the recycled communal public laundry facilities now given a ceiling made from a continuous loom above a wall of threaded steel fountains. Right; ‘Fondazione Stazione dell’Arte’ (detail) - motif of the symbolic blue ribbon attached to the wall of the gallery; a remnant of the 1981 performance. Photos: David Chandler

55 Pioselli A. 2013 http://www.domusweb.it/it/arte/2013/04/24/maria_lai_legarsi_alla_montagna.html
56 See fig 49 above.
57 A series of shows held in 2014 confirmed her status as a Sardinian cultural pioneer, with her Ulassai Foundation as the focus: http://www.domusweb.it/en/art/2014/09/05/maria_lai_ricucireilmondo.html
58 Su Marmuri Textile Co-operative; http://www.sumarmuri.it/cooptessile/azienda.asp
A planned future? Adapting to the contexts of Osini Vecchio and Gairo Vecchio; practical interventions

Osini Vecchio

Osini Vecchio is a case study of mixed use good practice. The comune has invested in a series of sluices and gulleys that serve to divert heavy rainfall events away from the town (3) and unmade pathway sides have been reinforced in places (8). As Osini is connected to its old town by the SP11 and recent housing has virtually connected with ruins abandoned in 1951 the investment can be assumed to be profitable to an area of the new town as much as the old. The relationship with its church of Santa Susanna and the upper church of San Giorgio is still productive with the areas near the latter becoming a community picnic area and park with barbecue facilities and play areas (7). New path resurfacing and the recolonisation of the residential plots is evident. Allotments and ad hoc water piping reveal the focus on possible financial profit to be derived from these market garden plots with their locked gates (4). Some small storage buildings have been purpose built in the area (2) testimony to the introduction of electrical plant and street lighting. There is evidence of purposeful regeneration in the upper town at Osini Vecchio, west of the SS11. The ruins of the old town have also benefitted from a successful house restoration project (1). The painted and restored façade makes a persuasive cultural statement and is the first local example of curating the heritage from the 1951 mudslides. The other project that has popular support is a small memorial garden to the south of the town (5). This features a drinking fountain, a small paved park with benches and a sculptural relief of a ‘giants tomb’ (insert 5) that co-promotes the legacy of nuragic prehistoric remains, numerous in this area.

On 25 May 2014 Sergio Podda organised a community day through local journalist support in Osini Vecchio; “Adopt the Village” (Adotta il Borgo59) with a particular focus on the surviving church of Santa Susanna. The one day event aimed to get local inhabitants interested in the history of the lost village and to find ways to memorialise the town. The initiative arose out an academic led conference held 7 - 8 December the previous year titled; “Soils, society and landscape; stories of water and stones”.60

The activities on the Adopt the Village day included identifying original structures, the old post office and the old hotel and reviving orchards. A community history/memory photography exhibition was set up in the church of Santa Susanna. A small cherry tree garden was planted in the precinct of the country church of San Giorgio above the town (6).

60 La Nuova. Edizione Nuoro. 5. 12. 2013; “Suoli, società e paesaggio”
Fig. 61. Osini Vecchio urban regeneration - photographic survey 2015.
Photos: David Chandler
The town to the east of the SP11 is in a neglected condition (see fig. 4) extensively overgrown and continues to be abused as passing traffic can easily park and leave the area. Apart from some interesting historical labels photocopied from the Angius - Casalis ‘Dizionario’, the 19th century census, pinned to some buildings, the zone is reverting to a state of indigenous flora.

Gairo Vecchio

Here the current urban situation remains, despite the exemplary, punctilious and thorough surveys, drawings and geophysical cores, reports and regulations, surprisingly static (see Appendices A and B). The town still offers a year round popular tourist opportunity because it benefits from an excellent site, morphology and plan that invites tourist visits with accessible steps and streets. There was some buttressing (1) of some larger structures and safety rails, basic electrical installations and some street lamps and hydraulic networks, but no sewers. The town awaits the type of initiative established at Osini, but has somehow forfeit its sense of ownership from its exiled community at Gairo Sant’Elena which faces, physically and culturally, in another direction.

A few lock up spaces have been repossessed and some pop-up allotments are appearing in the footprints of lost dwellings (2). The SP198 car park is very well positioned for tourist access, however the good quality of surviving roads inside the village results in some brief car window only visits. Motorcyclist touring groups regularly visit (3) as the scenic lure of the valley is compelling with even a glimpse of the sea from its south west site (see front cover illustration, fig 1.). A mural at Gairo Taquisara (4) creates an idealised image of the lost community and its railway from the point of view of a dispersed community.

On Sept 8 201561 a regional council at Cardedu reached an important landmark that cleared the way in terms of ownership and development rights. Francesco Pigliaru offered the Local Authorities at a token price of one Euro, various outstanding tenancies and claims that allowed the complete settlement of all outstanding claims of Gairo Vecchio and Cardedu that had been waiting for the

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transfer of building land in particular. These are promising times as public ownership implies careful control of all future private development of Gairo Vecchio;

“So that now they can finally be empowered by the possession of their own land and dwellings”.  

The legislation and building controls (Appendix B) at the Comune of Gairo Sant’Elena may require further commercial and community incentives to realise the considerable potential of the place (see fig.72).

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*Fig.63; Gairo Vecchio urban regeneration - photographic survey 2015. Photos: David Chandler*

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David Chandler; Memorialising Gairo Vecchio: the painting ‘Gairo: Via XXIII Ottobre’.
Methodologies from photography and landscape painting

Fig 64; David Chandler: ‘Gairo: Via XXIII Ottobre’. Acrylic on canvas. 500mm x 3000 mm October – December 2015 with additions in May 2016

Figs. 65 + 66; Gairo Vecchio; Via XXIII Ottobre; street level view looking south east with the ‘House of the Broken Stair’ (and detail from finished painting. Comparto 3 no.4, S2 from the P.P. Note the schist stones and mud from the 1951 cyclones and the wild oregano rooted into the street and the fig tree emerging from a courtyard. Right ‘Gairo: Via XXIII Ottobre’ detail of doorway

Photos: David Chandler
Paintings of these ruined towns seem to be surprisingly rare given the current debates on their legacy. Via XXIII Ottobre was an accessible subject to be measured and photographed using a method of measured photography with the camera taking standard 50mm lens portrait format photographs. These were subsequently digitally stitched together with inherent distortions (fig. 67);

![Fig. 67; David Chandler; ‘Gairo; Via XXIII Ottobre’ facing west. Composite photograph. Note the restored street name and the wooden barrier poles. These were omitted in the final painting. The roofless ‘House of the Broken Stair’ is on the left. David Chandler](image)

I found that the shadows on the ground were an essential part of reading the missing upper elements of the street. The changes in light, in particular the reflected light from across the road was to become a central narrative of the finished triptych. The spectator should sense the light that occupies the viewers’ space as much as the depth of the interiors tipping through to Via Roma on the terrace behind the street wall.

Some watercolours were produced at the location. Of particular interest was the ‘House of the Broken Stair’ Comparto 3, no.4, S2. Its granite staircase had been hammered away to discourage access to the upper rooms of the house. This doorway appears in the finished painting (fig.66) with a luminous white light as the roof is missing. Making these watercolours also drew my attention to the traces of the pigment still clinging to the walls of the houses; terracotta reds on the exterior and a very distinctive regional cobalt blue that was used throughout the interiors in every storey.

![Fig. 68; Gairo Vecchio: ‘House of the Broken Stair’. Watercolour and detail from ‘Gairo Vecchio; Via XXIII Ottobre’ David Chandler](image)

Part of the experience of this work is to sense the light that is reflected around the spaces in the late morning in September. The spectator’s response is to “walk” the three metres of the painted street investigating each of the doors and windows painted in a representational realism but an (impossible) elevation format, lacking a specific best point of view.


The catalogue of the Patrimonio Artistico della Sardegna 2014 contains many landscapes featuring villages but Gairo and Osini do not emerge as specific titles.
My approach is also very much indebted to the proto-photographic documentary paintings of the 18th century Grand Tourist, Thomas Jones but also to the digital renders and modelmaking disciplines of current architectural practice.

Fig. 69; David Chandler; ‘Gairo: Via XXIII Ottobre’ (first week progress with pencil squares visible. October 2015)

Three box depth 40mm canvas panels 500mm x 3000mm were bolted together to accommodate a scaled up version of the master photograph like a predella or frieze format. This was prepared with a pencil grid of 100mm squares. The key decision was to find an efficient palette that would best synergise with the subject. Titanium white, white primer, Mars black, Quinacridone Burnt Orange, Cobalt Blue and Cadmium Yellow, comprised a very simple set of red, blue, yellow colour primaries that would generate the extensive spectrum of grey tones required.

I made tools to apply paint as the work progressed. Masking tape stencils for horizontals, leaves, arches and tree stems. Waste cardboard edges to print grasses and extra fine elements. Areas were re-primed to allow for a new start. Avoiding impressionistic painting techniques, the stencils give the paint an authority and they generate space. In particular the weave of canvas is a surface that allows a dry brush overpaint that avoids opaque approximate colour mixes. Glazes were exploited to generate glass-like coloured lights especially in the painting of leaves against the sky. This can be better appreciated from a close up of the fig tree doorway in the finished version; brush overpainting that avoids making solid colour mixes.

Fig.70; ‘Gairo: Via XXIII Ottobre’ (detail).

The gap in the small courtyard wall reveals a fig tree and traces of a flat roof above and the arched opening onto Via Roma on the lower terrace

The painting was imagined as one frontal flat surface that had perforated spaces to allow the glimpse of another painting behind. A documentary elevation, in a certain sense. The decision to create a forward fringe of sunlit plants on the right side reflects the experience of viewing the street from a low earth terrace opposite these buildings. The coarse grasses clinging to the upper wall of the house on the right were important as they trap a ray of angled light that filters from the gutted shell of the large house. This technique allowed for the micro painting of the blue rocky hills across the valley at left. The other lost village of Osini Vecchio would be found in this tiny landscape segment and this reference is intentional.

The caesura of the black trees was inserted as a visual stopping point at far left. The representation of an overgrown street in the sharp Sardinian sunlight was a challenge that was addressed at nearly
every painting session. This was because it came to reveal so many “off stage” elements in the street; the height of the ‘House of the Broken Stair’ the presence of a masonry stack casting a shadow across the road and the pool of dappled shadow of a large fig tree in the left foreground which remains a challenge as the most revisited part of the painting. This is because that space is fictional. The road is very narrow at this part of Via XXIII Ottobre, but the composition forces it to become a wide earthy space (see fig.65).

Water based acrylic colours re-enact the walls washed by rain and bleached by the sun. Even the light on the black mud of the road generates leaf shaped stencils printed in and out of focus on the rubble. Any traces of human presence are made illegible by the unfamiliarity of the structures sculpted by decay; doorsteps dusted with soil, interiors carpeted with mud and schist, and furniture replaced by shrubs filling the living spaces.

Paint pigment burnt orange imitates a narrative of the coloured grey-pink lime wash and its textures. Brush strokes and masked areas imitate the fractured surfaces and the grainy plaster and concrete. The act of painting adapts happily to mimic the process of “unbuilding”.

Cobalt blue is used for the Sardinian sky and on the stained interior walls and alcoves. Cadmium yellow is the sunlight trapped inside the fig leaves in the sunlight like stained glass lanterns. The burnt orange is the colour of the bricks that were built into door frames and makes the ochre of a surviving sheet of exterior terracotta wall plaster. Black is the colour of the purple-grey glazes in the depths of the damaged rooms, distant arch silhouettes, tree branches and leaf shadows.

White is the pigment of sunlight that inserts spotlights through the gaps of the houses, shining upwards from cellars and down on to the road in sharp pools with grasses catching the sunlight. The colour becomes semaphor for the ruinous, perforated and unstable.

Fig. 71; David Chandler; ‘Gairo: Via XXIII Ottobre’ detail of Valle Pardu between ruined walls
Conclusion. Gairo and Osini; managing future legacy

The two ruined villages currently offer the visitor not only an archaeological encounter with ordinary pastoral peoples’ livelihoods but they also represent a tradition of urban ruin and its economic aftershock throughout Sardinia that we might read as inevitable. The villages are the culmination of long term miscalculations and under-resourcing, and it would be misleading to elevate them to a more substantial ‘allegorical’ or political status, as some academic ruin theory might suggest.

However, in the case of these Sardinian ‘paesi’ visitors will inevitably and happily conflate them with the tourism of the ancient past; ‘nuraghi’ and ‘macerie’ together in the same category so they all become default “old ruins”. They will be added to the list of curiosities and monuments in the landscape. They currently carry safety warnings, are subject to micro-colonisations of allotments, varieties of tourism, scavenging, dumping, mostly total neglect, and flora and fauna.

The cultural status of Gairo and Osini remains as impoverished as the inhabitants who left their houses over the years since 1951. What is left behind are traces in the standing ruins of the dignity of the deceased, like the “Sunday Best” suits of a generation that lived closely to the rules of their communities, like the black and white photos of moustached men in suits and women in national dress in the oval frames of the nearby cemeteries on the SS11 and SS198. We can still see narrative fragments of real lives; interior decoration and wall stencilled patterns in a traditional palette, ironwork balconies, decorative plasterwork, shelves and alcoves and a palpable sense of the scale of street width to wall height. There is now the real danger of falling masonry so the interiors continue to defend a no entry policy that is obligatory in terms of public safety.

The Gairo P.P. document concluded that the remains of Gairo Vecchio need to be treated as a cultural and historical site. The ‘flora’ solution also suggests itself as a highly desirable future as it is a productive and is a self-healing function of the landscape. The mud covered roads and steps provide bedding for a natural green ‘infiorata’, a street dressing of aromatic herbs, weeds and wild flowers without discrimination. Potentially the site of a Sardinian secret garden or ‘oasis’ (see fig 72), a protected park and an ecological conservation area as Sardinia retains a number of important and rare endemic plant species. Cacti, figs, vines and olives thrive on stony schists and all the vegetation generates an underground web of roots that bind the ruins while slowly pulling them down. Even the deep cellars provide natural plant boxes for trees, naturally sown by birds and animals.

66 Pálsson, G. 2012 p.559; “these are not old ruins”.
67 P.A.P.E.R.S. 2013, p.20; The European ‘eco-label’ for services to Sardinian tourism is an eco-trademark that operators can subscribe to.
68 However pig-keeping has been forbidden by P.P. statute.
69 P.P 2008 1.1. p 4-22. March 2008. Required an “urbanist reclamation and revaluation in respect of the relevant tourist asset tied to the historical, cultural and architectural issues and to the general context of the Valley of the Pardu”.
70 P.A.P.E.R.S. 2013: p.9; in the “Green Pubblic (sic) Procurement (GPP) Plan” is an initiative to promote the ecological resources of Sardinia; the improvement of environmental management downstream: “miglioramento della gestione ambientale “a valle”.”
Fig. 72; Unbuilding townscape. Ogliastra. ‘Oasi di Gairo? Collage reconstruction (based on the Giardino di Ninfa).

All photo sources: David Chandler

Gairo and Osini can be managed quite effectively in designated zones with nature as the rule of law synchronised with seasonal slow tourism. Just as archaeologists hunted the promising mounds of the Sardinian countryside to find the traces of nuraghi and Neolithic monuments, so, conversely, the top soils at selected areas of Gairo and Osini should be encouraged to deepen and consolidate their slopes and building foundations to generate an archaeologically interesting and environmentally benign valley regeneration, probably with the additional management of water and solar energy, which is abundant.

71 The abandoned medieval town of Ninfa in Lazio provides a compelling parallel, but is based on the presence of a spring water lake in the Pontine Marshes. The ruins have also been sculpted into shape in places. An “English” garden inside a medieval town; highly curated with controlled tourist access. Masonry mounds are employed to form flower beds. Garden tourism generates revenues for maintenance and is potentially economically self-sustaining. Difficult transport access is even an incentive in these places so they maintain a certain enigmatic reputation.

72 P.P.R. 2008 section 7 p.19; To offer typical local products to visitors as well as offering tourist itineraries to get to know the area and its natural assets directed at the eventual revaluation of the economic and social environment of the entire Pardu valley; “mettere a disposizione dei visitatori i prodotti tipici locali. Inoltre sarà possibile.....la realizzazione di itinerari turistici con i quali far conoscere il territorio e i monumenti naturali che lo caratterizzano, puntando a una riqualificazione economico-ambientale dell’intera vallata”.
But there is also a need for planned urban reflection and imaginative, active memorialisation which will offer a permanently valid future for these lost towns; from tourist mapping, documentary, photography, virtual reality and 3D recording to websites, virtual recreations, signage,\(^{73}\) storytelling and artist made interpretations and “stations” or monuments, lighting; projected or directed, and music, and traditional calendar feast days.\(^{74}\) Because these were places of human dignity, success and happiness, functioning without stigma. In this respect they merit greater investment into their cultural archive and into community celebration as their stories take their place in the national record. This urban ethos should be undertaken in parallel with the endeavours recommended by the 2008 P.P. which placed special emphasis on future service sector investment; tourism, local crafts, gastronomic offer and planned excursions.\(^{75}\)

\(^{73}\) Di Dio, R.; 2010 pp. 30-33 demonstrates recent signage solutions for Noto Antica, Sicily
\(^{74}\) Possibly including 14 – 19 October?
\(^{75}\) P.P. 2008 document A, relazione 1.1, p. 5-6.22 “il recupero del vecchio centro abitato e la valorizzazione dei siti di interesse naturalistico e archeologico, potrebbero costituire i punti di forza di un’operazione di rilancio economico e sociale della zona. Soprattutto nel settore terziario e dei servizi - turismo, artigianato, ricettività gastronomia, escursionismo, ecc. - la comunità di Gairo trarrebbe attraverso la valorizzazione della risorsa ambientale nuovo impulso e rivitalizzazione”.

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Appendix A

Gairo Vecchio: Index of the Detailed Plan (P. P.) documents 2004 - 8

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TAV. 6.10.1-6.10.2- COMPARTO 1- isolato n°10. Chiesa Spirito Santo- piane, prospetti, sezioni e
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TAV. 9.1- Particolari costruttivi- Casa Doneddu Marianna
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Schedule (Tav.) B: Gairo Vecchio; index of planning regulations \(\textit{norme di attuazione}\) from 2008

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Appendix C

Comune di Gairo 2008. The Piano Particolareggiato. Gairo Vecchio, Zone A, sector 3; Historic Centre. Survey document front cover with contents indicated as village street block (isolato), state of the structures (unita edilizie) and plan data, authors (progettisti) and date. This illustration is the example used to support the field work case studies on “Isolato 2” in this paper. Digital copy.
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