



Experience, reviews, discussions

When Unsustainability Kills: the Case of Consonno

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This research will examine the events which allowed a completely unsustainable real estate development plan to be accepted and, to some extent, be supported by local public administrations at different levels, as well as the social and economical conditions which made it culturally viable and acceptable to local residents and neighbours and stakeholders in general.

Key words: *unsustainability, development plans.*

1. Introduction

Early in the 1960s, Consonno – then a very small hamlet located on the hills of Brianza along the Adda river, not far from Lecco and some 40 kms north of Milan, whose history dated back thousands of years in time, inhabited by petty peasants who sold their produces on the nearby markets and workers of the small metal factories of the Lecco area - was object of a major real estate development plan aimed at turning it from a pacific, even boring, sleepy community into a thronged, Disneyland-style amusement park. The plan called for the displacement of the original community, in order to tear down the buildings – all traditional Lombard rural courthouses - and build the amusement park's tourist infrastructures. Despite the large financial investments, the plan turned out to be a complete failure, because of gigantic faults in the projects and the complete lack of any hydrogeological and environmental studies. The works carried out caused, in a matter of years, the complete degradation of the hydrogeological balance of the area, which eventually led to it be abandoned in the mid-1970s. Forced by the ecological disasters, the amusement park closed down and fell into oblivion until the early 1990s, when the owners tried to revive it. This new project was turned down by public administration and people's opposition together. Nowadays, Consonno is inhabited by the guests of an elders' pensionhouse

and the only family who has survived the 1960's and 1970's relocation programs: a status of ghost town which has somewhat avoided a large health problem, as the abandoned and degraded buildings of the wanted-to-be amusement park emit asbestos fibers into the air. The story of Consonno is useful in understanding how negative and destructive an economical development can be.

2. History of Consonno

Though the area has been inhabited ever since historical times - thanks to the fertility of the soil, the strong insulation and the presence of natural defences – the first historical news about Consonno only date as back as the XII century. The site is documented as being continuously inhabited at least ever since. Maps of the 18th and 19th centuries show a strong continuity in the community, and a rise in demography, especially in the mid 1800s, when population passed from 223 (1858) to 246 only four years later.

As it cannot be reasonably expected such an increase (10.30%!) was only due to a high number of births as compared to deaths, we must assume Consonno enjoyed a strong migration movement from nearby towns and hamlets, a sign of social and

economic well being of a community, strongly holding to their way life centred around the church and the traditional Lombard-style rural farmhouse.

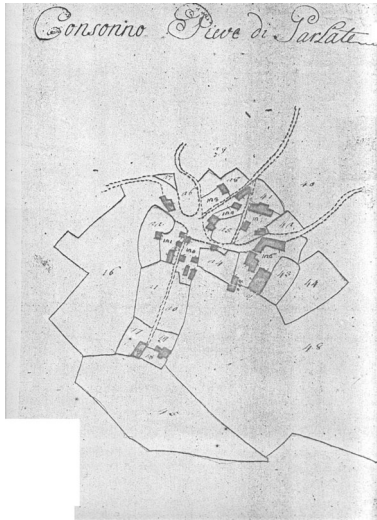


Fig. 1. A map of Consonno in the 18th century. Detail from a Theresian cartography at the Archivio di Stato in Como

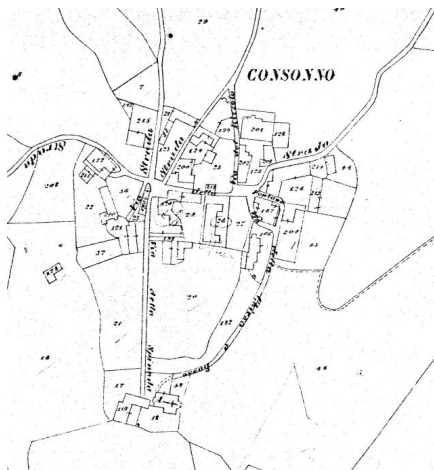


Fig. 2. A map of Consonno at the end of the 19th century. Detail from Regno d'Italia cartography at the Archivio di Stato in Como



Fig. 3. One of the many Lombard-style rural farmhouses that characterized Consonno. This picture was taken in 1955, a handful of years before destruction began.

At this time, Consonno can count on some 212 ha., mostly cultivated at cereals, vegetables, fruits, and especially vineyards for the production of wine and mulberry trees to feed silkworms and obtain the precious thread. All products were then sold on the Lecco and Milan markets.

The 1900's settlements stand on the very site of previous, centuries old dwellings: indeed, this was a policy traditionally used by small, peasant communities to save lands for farming and herding. The hamlet was linked to the other, lower lying villages and towns by a road stretching on the softly rolling western slopes. As the eastern slope, the one watching over Olginate and the Adda river valley, was steeper, only a minor, dirt road would run on it. Villagers knew this side of the mountain was more easily hit by landslides when heavy rains fell.

3. The Immobiliare Bagno development plan

1960 marks the beginning of the end for Consonno. All estates and buildings are concentrated into the hands of Mario Bagno's Immobiliare Consonno Brianza s.p.a di Mario Bagno e C., located in Rome, specialized in the realization of great public works, like highways, airports, bridges and viaducts.

Why an enterprise accustomed to project and realize public works worth hundreds of millions of liras (of those years!) should be interested in a small and unknown hamlet on the hills of Brianza? The project drawn by Mario Bagno, Conte di Valle d'Olmo – one of the many real estate speculators (commonly known by the nickname “palazzinari”, a depreciative term for building speculator) who, in those years of economic development and ruthless and ruleless real estate exploitation, with the destruction or heavy degradation of many of the best jewels of Italy's arts, architectures and urban realizations – aims at building a large entertainment and amusement park in place of the farming village. Something in between Disneyland and Rimini, we might say, to satisfy the demand of new leisure time activities of families in Lombardy and Milan in particular. A booming economy (in those years, Northern Italy was rapidly shifting from an agricultural economy to an industrial one) meant that families in the so-called Industrial Triangle (Milan, Turin and Genua) had, for the first time in their history, lots of money in their pockets and were eager to spend them on anything. A spreading motorization – car production was the real engine of the economic boom – meant that families could travel independently, without relying on trains and buses. Mario Bagno wants to take advantage of all that, and call families to spend their extra money in his amusement park.

As a matter of facts, the whole project seems to be born by pure chance. In an interview with the famous Italian journalist Camilla Cederna, Mario Bagno himself admitted that his main aim was “recover all materials and tools I have somewhere”,

dispersed over the main road works active all over Italy. «Eight, ten, twenty dozers and caterpillars, everything has been demolished, the houses down, the woods down, all that was there has been levelled» he proudly and boldly told the journalist.

The first action by the new landlord was to convince the Olginate Town Hall (in 1928 Consonno had been included into the larger township of Olginate) to decide about the construction of a new road linking State Road 36 to the rural hamlet, in place for the old one, which climbed the hill on a longer way, on the other side of the mountain. To carry out the necessary roadworks, the Town Hall forcefully disposed (though legitimately using all legal procedures) Consonno's petty peasants of their small plots of land: left without assets and means of production, many of the few residents had to go to work to the small factories down in Olginate and the rest of the Adda river valley. The decrease in population was no problem to Mario Bagno: on the opposite, it made it easier to proceed on the realization of his project, as fewer residents also meant lesser resistance to his works.

In 1964, dozers and caterpillars enter into play. All buildings are demolished, to clear the path: houses, barns and farmhouses, by then no more used due the collapse of the agriculture production in the area. The tavern, a hotel and some of the service buildings of the future tourist resort take their place. The woods that used to fill the sides and the summit of the hill are cleared to build roads and parking lots for cars and buses. Clearing the woods would turn out, in a short period of time, to be a great mistake, bound to deploy its deadly consequences for the Immobiliare Consonno Brianza in a matter of very few years.

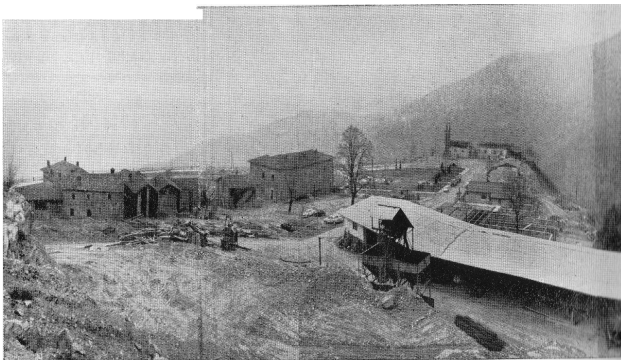


Fig. 4. Dozers and caterpillars have accomplished their duty

In 1966, the hydrogeological system of the area fails under heavy rains. It's the year of the great Florence flood, and Tuscany wasn't the only region in Italy to receive out-of-ordinary rainfalls. Brianza, too, had to cope with more than abundant water from the sky and into lakes and rivers. The slopes of Colle di Brianza could not stand the pressure and, no longer held together by the treeroots, slid down on the network of roads between Olginate and Consonno built by Mario Bagno, forcing a stop to the works.



Fig. 5. A picture of the large landslide that hit Colle Brianza in Fall 1966

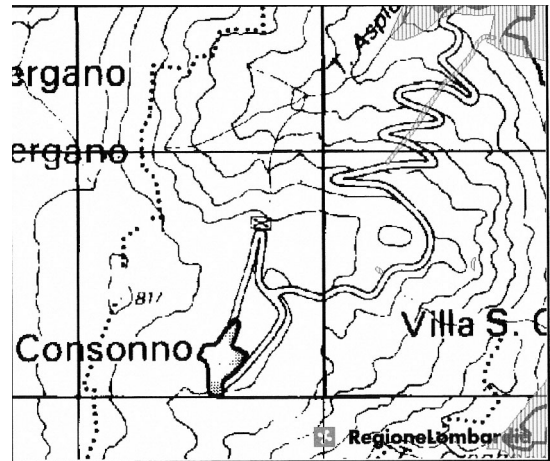


Fig. 6. This map taken from the Regione Lombardia Servizio Cartografico shows the road between Consonno and Olginate and the path followed by the 1966 landslide

The following April more heavy rains cause, once again, landslides over the road and a new halt to the works. The blame goes to the lack of any water control works whatsoever: left free to flow without constraints, surface waters move around rocks, sands, trunks, asphalt and all kinds of debris. The sudden deforestation carried out left the soil unprotected and the action of the heavy rains proves to be deadly for the would-be entertainment park.

It's only after these disasters that the first critical voices appear on the local newspapers. Mario Bagno's initiative had first been welcomed with enthusiasm, as a potential source of wealth and work. In January 1965 the *Giornale di Lecco* had presented the project as *the installation of a fabulous touristic and residential resort...by Count Mario Bagno, enlightened author of the work*. The hydrogeological disasters of 1966-1967 convince many that the project, in fact, cannot be realized. November 6, 1967 marks the u turn: on the *Giornale di Lecco* there appears an article titled *Will the real estate rules save Consonno? The Chinese pagoda at the Consonno tourist resort: a dumb fantasy never expressed before*.

Despite all accidents and disasters, the works go on and the resort, though not yet completed, opens to the public. Till the mid-1970s when some 300 meters of road disappear under another landslide: this time, though, with mud and stones there fall down to the valley the last hopes to bring the project to a successful end. The major consequence of this new disaster, indeed, is an immediate and complete stop to

the activity of the resort. Not many people spend a tear on that.

Critics and charges heavily invest Mario Bagno. On October 22, 1976, the daily *La Provincia*, under the title *Huge monument to urbanistic degradation*, writes *The road to reach the tourist resort, opened with dozers along the mountain slopes (certainly not opt to host road constructions) and the excavations carried out to build the centre of the resort, have destroyed the hydrogeological balance of the area; works carried out without any safety measures to avoid slides and falls. With some of these measures, probably, the road would have stood the pressure Consonno is paying for an absurd development. The road traced to serve the incredible tourist resort has altered the geological balance of the area.*

The late condemn could not help in reviving a community, cancelled by the use of a ruthless strength to chase a dream turned into a nightmare. Today, where somebody had imagined crowds of children and kids with parents going for easy and cheap emotions, there survive only a small group of elders, into a retirement house hosted in one of the buildings dismissed after the failure of the project.

Count Mario Bagno fought till the very last to protect his creature. Still in 1990, when he was 89, the main actor of one of the worst environmental and social disaster in Lombardy loudly asked the Olginate Town Hall restored the road to Consonno. Expected cost: over one billion liras (500 million euros, 1990 value). The Town Hall, of course, refused. The weekly *Il Resegone*, wrote, on the 12 of January 1990, *Consonno, speculation under sight? Rumours say somebody would like to revive the former Amusement Park, aware the re-opening of a resort part Disneyland and part Riccione could call in many visitors (and lots of money).* The newspaper reported about talks concerning a would-be project for a rack railway to take tourists from Olginate to Consonno. For good sake, at least this last abuse of the mountain has been called off.

Nowadays, the visitor is presented with a completely degraded situation. Culturally speaking, the heritage of the area has been destroyed, there does not exist anymore a Consonno community: those who were adults in the 1960s are now in their 70s or older; their sons and grandsons only share very few links to their ascendants' history. They are, for instance, fully members of an industrial society, as their grandfathers were petty peasants farming their own plot. Economically, Olginate (and the whole northwestern area of Lombardy) has bet on an industrial development: agriculture represents only a very marginal sector of the local economy, though not yet completely eradicated. The remnants of the tourist resort serve as refuge for young couples looking for privacy in isolated places, and especially parties by punks, raves and other more or less disbanded groups, with large use of alcohol and drugs. The leftovers of these parties – used syringes, broken bottles and so on – can be easily spotted inside and outside the cement-and-iron skeletons of the resort buildings. There is also a health problem, as the degradation caused by

natural agents and acts of vandalism alike, has uncovered the asbestos used to isolate roofs and walls: from the wounds and bruises in the walls there fly out small, broken fibers of asbestos, the wind then carries a very long distance, with a heavy environmental and health problem.

4. What is left today?

Of the original community there is left only the Saint Maurice's Church and the close by Parrish House. The latter, though, is in a very low state, while the small church has been completely restored a few years ago.

On the other side of the square, embellished (!) by a fountain and a gazebo and with flowers and plants scattered all around, the visitor will be able to admire what is left of the project of a Disneyland in Brianza. First of all, the Party Hall, whose original grandeur is witnessed only by an iron skeleton and wooden walls. On its 800 sqm. Count Bagno had dreamed of organizing ball parties for visitors and hotel guests.



Fig. 7. The would-be Party Hall

Hotel Plaza – at least, what is left of it – thought to offer hospitality to visitors in its sixty rooms, with an enormous terrace for parties and banquets, is the only building yet used. Ever since the 1980s, indeed, it hosts an elders' house.



Fig. 8. What is left of the Oriental Palace

The most important building of the tourist resort, though, was to be the Oriental Palace, a building in moresque style even provided with a false minaret, a trick to hide the water silo. Its rectangular shape runs some 100 meters in length, and overlooks a large empty space where, in the original project, was to be hosted an open air botanic garden, with many

different varieties of flowers and plants, and even a little lake with a fountain. At ground floor, a long columned alley thought for hosting shops for tourists and gamerooms: in place of all these services and shops we only find deserted, abandoned and degraded rooms and alleys. Walls and ceilings are degraded, doors and windows are gone long time ago. In one of these rooms a broken fridge. Two large stairways take the visitor to first floor, where a large terrace was to give room to more shops. Second and third floor were designed to host thirteen and twelve small apartments respectively.

5. A review of Italy's urban laws over time

Italy's urban and environmental planning is born and has firstly developed itself as an instrument targeted at ensuring compatibility between the different form of exploitation of a territory and its resources with the overall aim of integrating short term needs with longer term ones. This is true since the 1980s, though. Till that time, there existed no environmental planning and management (the Ministry of the Environment was only introduced in 1986) and urban laws still got their inspiration from a 1800s-style concept of the territory as organization of a human space, bound to host all human activities. Basic part of such a concept is that setting up the organization of a space fit to host all human activities requires the abatement or at least the full control of all barriers nature poses to them. This concept is the cultural cradle of plans and projects such as the levelling of hills to build roads and viaducts, commercial and industrial areas; the tunnelling of rivers and creeks to avoid flooding; the use of highly invasive technologies and techniques to control sliding.

As a matter of fact, for tens of years Italy's juridical system completely overlooked natural dynamic factors as actors in landscape changing and shaping: it only concentrated on urban factors in space organization. For instance, agricultural areas were only characterized as reserves of territory (where by this term it was meant plots of lands not yet built but available for exploitation) bound to host, in a next future, the development of urban dwellings. The basics for the horizontal development of cities (urban sprawl).

The transformation from agricultural into urban areas was eased by parameters like a low building index (fixed at 0,03 cubic meters to the squared meters by DM 1444/68). No attention would be paid by rules and directives to the quality of the environment or to the problems and needs of farming lands as such. Inside cities and towns, green areas were only useful to fulfil the minimum standards required: no attention to their very quality and fruitability by citizens and residents, or the actual needs of the local ecosystems. Many a local administrations even counted flowerbeds, central reserves and median strips as green areas in order to reach the prescribed minima.

Until the late 1970s, the environment was actually part of the urbanistic field, as of Dpr 616/1977 art. 80, which concentrated in it all disciplines concerned with using and organizing the territory. It was not until 1994 that this situation was changed, thanks to a sentence of the Administrative Court (TAR) of Friuli Venezia Giulia (sentence 17/05/94 n.224).

In the 1990s competence about territory and environment eventually passed on to the individual Regions. Many of them have actually set up juridical system about sustainable development and protection of the environment. Lombardy, for instance, has introduced concept of sustainable development in its system in 1999, with a Regional Plan for Landscape and Territory Protection.

The shift from a central to a local competence in environment and urban development, and the territory as a whole, is a radical change from the centralized government of the territory used ever since the end of World War II. It was a centralized planning whose main requirements was the existence of a strong central government, with deep knowledge of all issues and topics in local areas, and technical competence to project, decide and control. To the opposite, it was just a way to distribute bribes and favors by the political world, no matter what it meant for people locally concerned and affected.

Small towns like Olginate, indeed, had no means to oppose and stop projects like Mario Bagno's amusement park: they lacked the knowledge, the competence, the technical skills and even the authority necessary.

Experiences like Consonno's have been useful in introducing a new balance in the system, where local administrations hold all the necessary requirements (and if they do not, they can turn to their own County or Regional governments for help). Also, concepts like sustainable development, protection of natural resources, environmental impact evaluation, have been introduced in the daily administration of territory.

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Nedarnios raidos problemos: Konsono miesto pavyzdys

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20 a. 7-ojo dešimtmečio pradžioje Konsonas, tada mažas miestelis, kurio istorija prasidėjo daugiau nei prieš 1000 metų, priklausė smulkiems fermeriams, parduodantiems savo produkciją artimiausiose turgavietėse, ir mažų Leso rajono metalo fabrikėlių darbininkams. Pagrindinis miestelio plėtros tikslas buvo paversti taikią, nuobodžią, snaudžiančią bendruomenę į Disneilendo pramogų parko stiliaus gyvenvietę. Tai sukėlė vietinės bendruomenės nerimą, nes reikėjo nugriauti senus, tradicinius miestelio pastatus ir kurti turistines pramogų infrastruktūras. Nepaisant milžiniškų investicijų, planas buvo pasmerktas nesėkmei dėl didelių projektavimo klaidų ir nebaigto hidrogeologinio aplinkos ištyrimo. Darbai sukėlė visišką hidrogeologinės aplinkos disbalansą, piką pasiekusį 8-ojo dešimtmečio viduryje. Ekologinių nelaimių prispaustas užsidaryti privertas pramogų parkas buvo pamirštas iki 20 a. paskutiniojo dešimtmečio, kai savininkai nutarė jį atgaivinti. Naujasis projektas buvo atmestas prieštaraujant valstybinėms įstaigoms bei visuomenei. Dabar Konsonas – apleistas miestelis, keliantis didelių sveikatos rūpesčių dėl griūvančių pramogų parko pastatų skleidžiamų į atmosferą asbesto dulkių.

Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjami įvykiai, kurie parodė, kad nedarni raida gali būti sąlygojama netikusio planavimo ir vietinių valstybinių įstaigų neatsakingo požiūrio, taip pat socialinių bei ekonominių veiksnių.