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# Calabria's territory through the Magna Grecia Park: New Projects of Smart Tourism

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## Abstract

The Magna Grecia Park project consists in the construction of a monumental theme park in Croton's province, inspired by the VI century BC Magna Graecia, when the city was a leading polis. Restoring its lost centrality is the main intent of designers and promoters, believing the park could be an opportunity for growth and development. Analyzing the feasibility of the project, as I have previously done in a research conducted between stakeholder analysis and desk research, allows to examine the territory on which it could arise; and at the same time gives back the possibility of doing so in 'dialogue' with the alternative models of socio-economic development, cultural revitalization, and environmental protection that the MGP project suggests. With this paper, building on previous work, I intend to introduce an additional line of investigation, to be considered as a step in ongoing research. Since this is a tourist attraction of considerable dimensions, the question must be asked: does the hypothetical realization of Magna Grecia Park meet the standards of Smart Tourism? How can it, by returning new development scenarios, transmit a different narrative of a region endowed with great tourism potential but so far characterized by significant infrastructural limitations?

**Keywords:** Croton, Calabria, Magna Grecia Park, Smart Tourism

## Introduction

The present paper is an in-depth study of a broader, and still in progress, research on the Calabrian territory. The study has, so far, been centered on the sustainability and feasibility of the construction of a massive theme park with a cultural focus that could rise in Croton's province: Magna Grecia Park. In the view of creators, planners, and supporters, the MGP could serve as a vehicle for the economic, social, and cultural revitalization of the entire region. To understand in what terms the possible construction of the impressive tourist attraction could benefit the area, a stakeholder analysis (Kvale, 1996; Duxbury, 2012) was carried out, which was accompanied by a study of the main points of interest in the area involved (Spanò, 2024).

Since this is a particularly costly and high-impact maneuver, it is necessary to understand how it can fit into the context; and, in line with the requirements of the most recent directions, whether it is complied to the basics of smart tourism. These last two points are the subject of this paper, to which are inevitably intertwined a reflection focused on the possibilities that the most recent technologies provide in terms of territorial growth and narrative. In the vision of the project – which essentially embraces the world of ESG – it is, in fact, recognized a considerable importance to those technological-innovative elements (Dall'Ò, 2014) that could



restore renewed development scenarios and convey a different image of a region endowed with great tourism potential but so far characterized by significant infrastructural limitations. In an era of information sharing on a global scale and digital transition, it is of crucial importance to focus on the transmitted and shared image of a destination. These are some of the key points of the Magna Grecia Park project, which can become, in this sense, a filter for interpreting and rethinking the Calabria region. First, it is then necessary to ask: what does the narrative of a territory consist of?

### **The performative, cognitive, and attractive dimensions of the territory's narrative**

When we say “territory” we refer to something that all of us, within a specific architecture of meaning, understand. But which, in the meantime, we rewrite: as risible as the intervention may be, we enrich the concept, revive its praxis. Not surprisingly, in the present work, an attempt is made to point to a new projects. Just as the narrative of the territory that we will propose, while mediated by the territory itself – at once physical and cultural – will add something about the Calabrian region and Crotona's city. Therefore the narration of a place is configured as a *performative, cognitive* and – especially when framed within the tourism horizon – *attractive act*.

It is possible to speak of narration of the territory as a *performative act* since each place is co-constituted with the multi-scalar and polyphonic narration that is made of it. As argued by Marcello Tanca about tourism, in fact:

“Although a certain ideological determinism wishes to convince us otherwise, tourism does not spring directly from the ‘beauty of the coasts’ and the ‘unpolluted sea’ [...]. In order [...] to become ‘tourism’ it is necessary that these things first enter a circuit of desires and expectations that is fed by speeches and representations [...]. However, this is still not enough; the symbolization of the real would remain a dead letter if it were not translated, day after day and in contexts that are different from time to time – however, never immobile nor inert – into practices, emotions, and performances that must do mainly with the body” (Tanca, 2018, p. 16; translation by the author).

Along the same vein, Fabio Pollice highlights that the narrative of a territory is not reduced to its description but is also configured as an interpretive gesture, which “the moment it becomes a ‘story’ and is” shared “ends up influencing the way in which one thinks about that territory, the way in which one lives it; in other words, it interacts with the processes of territorialization” (Pollice, 2017, p. 108; translation by the author). Ultimately, one could say with Paolo Furia (2023): there are not absolutely “virgin” places, since when the human eye observes a territory it already makes an individual mapping of it; the latter is, at the same time, mediated by the territory, which is itself a condition of human experience and an element of individual and collective identity construction no less than culture (Entrikin, 1991). In other terms – those of cognitive scientists Vittorio Gallese and Ugo Morelli (2024) – in addition to being observers of reality, we are, simultaneously, observed by reality: every assertion of the autonomy of one's actions depends on a generative context.



The narrative of a territory takes the shape of a *cognitive* act, because “Nature is a fact, but also a narrative of this fact by *Homo narrator*” (Berque, 2021, p. 182; translation by the author); in other words, from the human perspective, nature is always nature-through-culture (Pecere, 2024), and it is difficult – if not impossible – to clearly separate things, representations, and practices. It is necessary to point out here, in passing, that human culture is mostly spoken, and always with a linguistically constructed narrative we must deal (Turco, 2010; Sini, 2016).

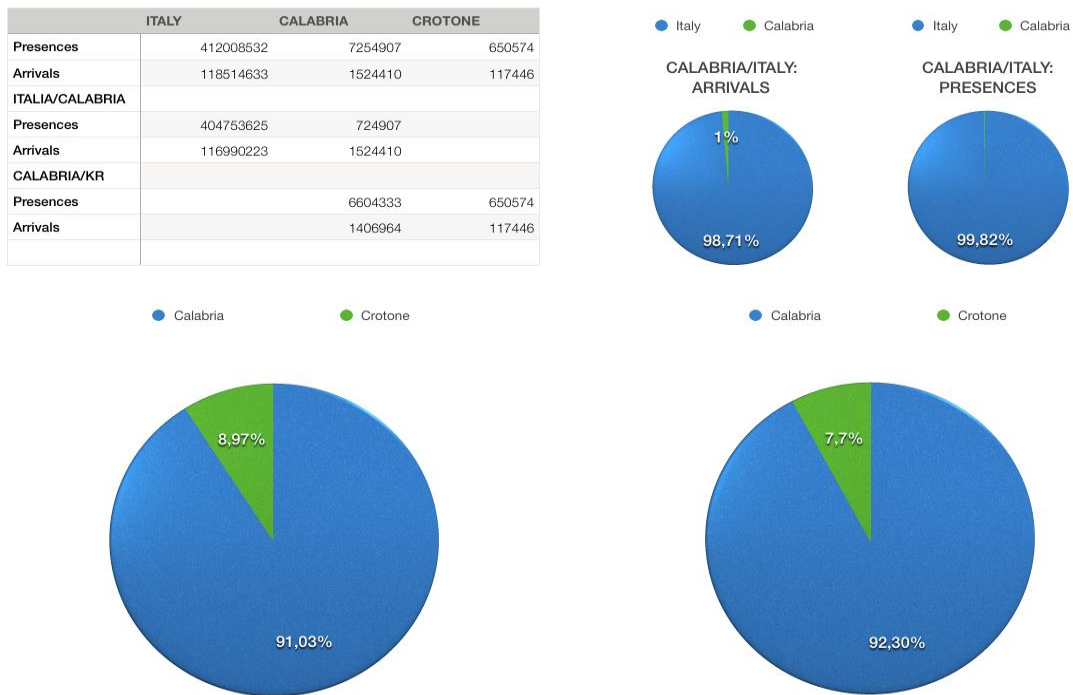
In the framework of tourism geography, moreover, the narrative of a territory is structured as a maneuver closely related to *attractiveness*; in this context, it is also necessary not to forget “that a clear distinction cannot be made between orienting and attracting purposes, both because often the two purposes coexist within the same narrative, and because just as frequently, attracting narratives can have orienting effects and conversely” (Pollice, 2017, p. 109; translation by the author). Each narrative, then, is affected by the media that filter it: tools that, if not the message itself – as McLuhan (ed. it. 2023) argued already in the 1960s – interfere on the subject-object dyad both in terms of processing and restitution of the narrative and under the respect of fruition. Indeed, not only each medium provides humans with a peculiar view of the world, but it can, even, be argued that technologies constitute human cognition (Parisi, 2018). Speaking of tourism and new technologies, Claude Raffestin (1991) already foreshadowed a new scenario, within which every place could, to some extent, become tourist, even though it does not possess what are the traditional characteristics of a tourist destination (MacCannell, 2005; Santagata, 2013; D’Eramo, 2019).

These are all elements to be considered when referring to an extremely controversial territory such as the Calabrian one, in which the Magna Grecia Park is supposed to rise. Before landing on a brief description of the MGP project and attempting to understand whether it can correspond to the cardinal principles of Smart Tourism, it’s therefore necessary to analyze the Calabrian region under the respect of the current flows of tourism and territorial offer.

## **Calabria between tourism, points of interest and MGP**

### **Flows of tourism, seasonality, and trends**

From the data collected by ISTAT (**Fig. 1**) in relation to the number of arrivals and presences on the Italian territory in 2022, Calabria covers a minimal portion of the total on a national scale (7.2/412 million presences; 1.5/118 million arrivals), coming to lap up a percentage that is between 0.8% and %. A further element to be taken into consideration, given that Magna Grecia Park should rise on a site already identified (but not yet made public) in the province of Crotona, concerns the number of arrivals and presences of the city in relation to the region’s total: again, the Pythagorean city maintains numbers that do not exceed 10% of the overall Calabrian figure. Since this is also a qualitatively-quantitatively monumental operation, it’s appropriate to dwell on the seasonality of Calabrian tourist activity, which – from the figures – is predominantly summer. As the graphs show, in fact, both in terms of arrivals (77%) and in terms of presences (88%), in Calabria there is a disproportionate concentration in the three ‘hot’ months of the summer season, with increases that – compared to the average figure for the remaining part of the year – even touch 1500% (Fig. 2).

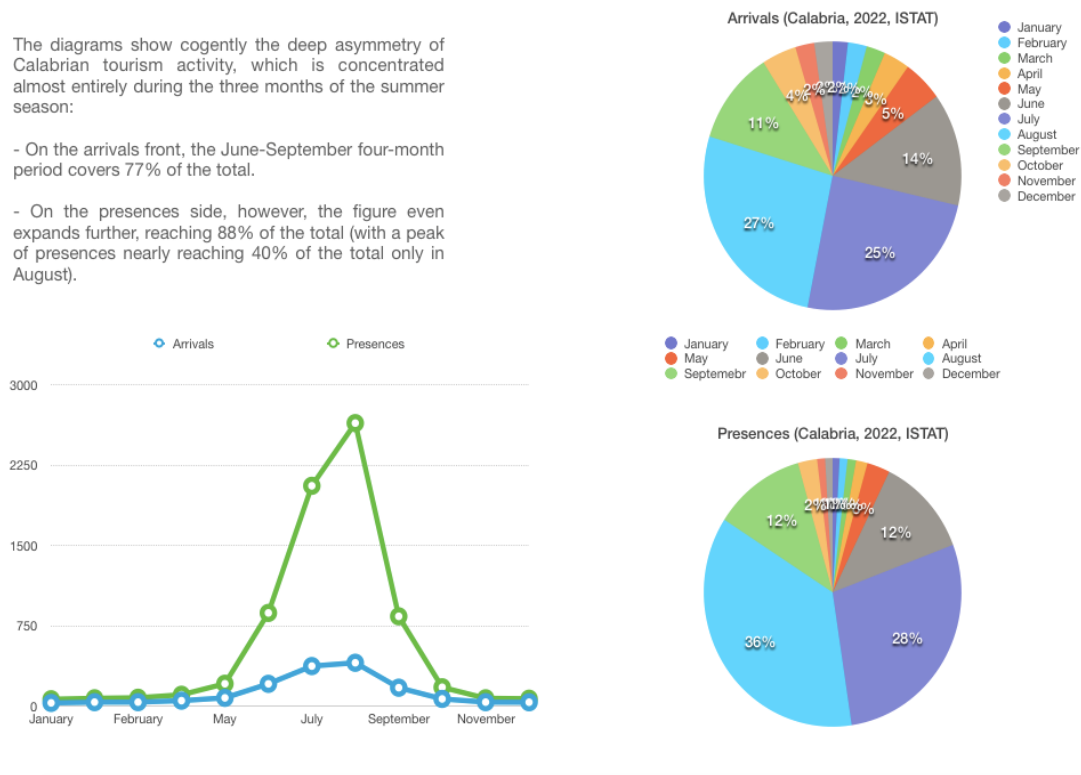


**Figure 1.** Arrivals and presences in Italy, Calabria, and Crotona.  
Source: Author's compilation based on data collected by ISTAT.

The diagrams show cogently the deep asymmetry of Calabrian tourism activity, which is concentrated almost entirely during the three months of the summer season:

- On the arrivals front, the June-September four-month period covers 77% of the total.

- On the presences side, however, the figure even expands further, reaching 88% of the total (with a peak of presences nearly reaching 40% of the total only in August).



**Figure 2** Calabrian region under the respect of the current flows of tourism.  
Source: Author's compilation based on data collected by ISTAT.



## Territory and points of interest

The offer of the Crotone and surrounding territory, at least on the naturalistic-environmental and cultural level, is configured as a constellation of sites, perhaps still not duly valued from the perspective of the overall view. A prominent role, moving within the perimeter of the municipality of Crotone, belongs to a Greek archeological Heritage of worldwide significance, mainly distributed between the *National Archeological Museum of Crotone* (in the historic center) and the *National Museum and archaeological park of Capo Colonna* (about 10 km from the center of Crotone). In the latter, remains from Roman era and monuments from later ages can also be admired. These include the *Nao Tower* and the *Sanctuary of Saint Mary of Capo Colonna*, still today the end point of a cultural procession that the devotees of Crotone undertake the third Sunday of May, to celebrate the Virgin Mary.

Much more extended, partially out the municipality of Crotone, is another key point of interest: the *Capo Rizzuto Marine Protected Area*. The marine reserve, with a surface measuring around 15 thousand hectares and extending linearly for 42 kilometers, is one of the most extensive in Europe. The Protected Area includes a significant Heritage, both naturalistic (countless special areas of conservation) and historical (some cited above).

Another relevant point of interest, not so far from the construction area of the Magna Grecia Park, is the *Sila National Park*, whose perimeter is contained in 19 municipalities, divided among three districts: Catanzaro, Cosenza, and Crotone. Within its about 74000 hectares of surface is articulated an immense geological-cultural heritage with a very high rate of biodiversity, inextricably intertwined with its geographical position. *Sila National Park* is a scenario in which environmental safeguard and socio-economic development already meet in ways of sustainable tourism. This is only part of the territorial framework in which the attempt undertaken by the creators and promoters of Magna Grecia Park is embedded.

## An overview of MGP

“The Magna Graecia Park is not only a theme park but an open-air museum of the ancient Magna Graecia: it’s possible to have fun and learn at the same time; the entertainment is the medium to acquire information about the great characters of modern Western Civilization; figures that completely changed our culture, that have changed the world, and that are actual still today. [...] The project, that has become highly specialized, embraces essentially the world of the ESG (Environment Social and Governance): it has not only an economic impact but mostly social, environmental, and territorial effects. [...]; fundamentally, it lays on the bond among three business assets: the entertainment and the touristic sector; the environment and the natural energetic sector; the housing sector, that involves the real estate and residential business” (Antonio Lidonnici, interview conducted by the author in December 2023).

As anticipated by the words of engineer Antonio Lidonnici, the designer of the MGP, it is a structure whose thematic areas and sections would extend over an area of about 160 hectares: a feature that would make the MGP one of the largest theme parks in Italy and one of the largest in Europe in terms of sizes and numbers of attractions. The main thematic areas are: the *Polis area* (in which a scale reproduction of the main poleis of Magna Graecia around the 6th century BC is planned: these



would run along an artificial lake of 20 hectares simulating the Ionian and Tyrrhenian Sea); the *Village of Knowledge* (which should contain a series of pavilions, divided in expositive thematic areas) and the *Ancient Greece Olympics* (which should have inside multiple real size arenas, with re-enactments of ancient sporting events, physically or through VR technologies).

In addition, the project includes the building of a *residential area* (to think in terms of long-term renting), served by a *shopping center*, including emergency medical care and a variety of stores: from food markets to clothing stores that could become showcases of local products (Messina, Nicosia, Porto, 2024). It's also planned to construct a *modern sports area*, an *administrative area*, the *systems area*, a 9,5 hectares *water park*; Last but not least, it is the *postgraduate campus*, which would comprise a higher research institute of Magna Graecia's history: "a structure that has the ambition of becoming a hub [...] of many centers distributed all around the world among university departments, foundations, and institutions focusing their research on Magna Graecia" (Antonio Lidonnici, interview conducted by the author in December 2023).

In what terms, then, can Magna Grecia Park stand as a potential theater for the development of new Smart Tourism paradigms? What could it give back to the Calabrian territory regarding economic-social and sustainable development? How could it, contextually, convey a renewed storytelling (Malvica, 2024)?

## MGP and Smart Tourism Destination

Before passing through the MGP project, it's necessary to clarify that the *concept-scenario* of *Smartness* – beyond what is usually thought – is not semantically and concretely exhausted within the perimeter of technological innovation; quite the opposite, it's a subject that spans multiple social and territorial spheres: "a smart environment is such when it acts both in the name of the overcoming of emergencies [...] and in the name of the quality of life for citizens and communities on the social and economic plan, but also in the name of social innovation and knowledge even before technological innovation" (Morazzoni, Zavettieri, 2023, p. 88; translation by the author).

Starting from this point of view, I intend to cross the MGP project in dialogue with the EU's established about Smart Tourism Destination theme, not far from the framework that Giffinger and his collaborators (2007) outlined, identifying six macro-dimensions that a territory should have to be regarded as smart: economy, environment, people, living, governance, and mobility. Systems to be embraced not in a static sense but as mobile grids (Vanolo, 2014).

It is also important not to forget the ranking systems used in Italy to define the smartness rating of territories. Among these stand out the *ICity Rank* (based on the level of digitization achieved by Italian county seats) and the *Smart City Index* (this is a broader classification system developed with the intention of estimating the quality and quantity of services that an area provides for improving the quality of life of those who live there and promoting innovative industries).

## Smart Economy

Progressing step by step, and in random order, the *smart economy* item can be answered through the words of the creator and designer of the MGP, engineer Antonio Lidonnici:



“We live in an area that shows one of the highest risk indexes in the world in economic-financial forecasts. So the basic concept is that we are in a much more serious situation than it may appear; the very serious problem that our land has is that there is no investment, no economy arrives from outside, it is a stagnant economy [...]. It’s necessary to propose alternatives to the lack of culture of social, long-term planning. So what is the strategy that will continue to be applied? Not the search for an investment fund since we live in one of the most difficult territorial contexts in the world. The idea, then, is not only the project but the model through which to realize the project. Because if we proceed according to the known, codified models – which everyone believes are the models applicable to the normal world – we find extreme difficulties. So, the only way to get someone from outside to want to invest in our territory lies in trying to give them back a different, and concrete, vision of this territory. Convincing people from outside requires engaging those who have already, in this territory, interests” (interview conducted by the author in December 2023).

### Smart Governance and Smart People

The MGP, however, is not only addressed to investors who already have interests in the area but is also conceived with the aim of tracing a bridge between the park – the new tourist site – and the hosting territory. From this point of view, the creators and supporters actively involve the community in multi-scalar terms; the establishment of a foundation, in fact, can already be considered a concrete expression of the core purpose: to revitalize from a socio-economic-territorial perspective a region rich in points of interest but characterized by an economy that is tendentially stagnant and, so far, not entirely capable of mapping out a shared, across-the-board, integrated path with regard to the protection and enhancement of geo-physical and historical-cultural heritage (Gambi, 1978; Nicoletti, 2011, 2018; Barilaro, 2021).

According to the most recent analyses conducted by project planners, furthermore, it has been estimated that the MGP could provide 2500 direct job places, and more than 5000 other indirect job places, bringing many benefits to various sectors in the territory. The *shopping center*, for example, has been intended as a showcase for local production firms, which would have the opportunity to sell their products; the pavilions could house events, fairs, festivals, not to mention the network that could be formed with the *postgraduate campus* development.

This is closely related to two other main dimensions of smart tourism: the engagement of residents in decision-making (*governance*) and the active role of citizens from the overall standpoint (*people*) in the name of improving the quality of life of inhabitants and visitors. Considering this, the question “who is the storyteller of our places, landscapes, environments?” (Morazzoni, Zavettieri, 2023, p. 57; translation by the author) can be rethought by referring to the vision and mission of the MGP:

“Advanced technologies will be used to experience the cultural heritage: virtual, augmented, mixed reality, holograms, artificial intelligence, virtual production, motion capture, motion tracking; [...]. Each visitor will then be provided with a tracker, a bracelet that will become the tool with which various activities can be conducted: from payments to involvement



in a zoned role-playing game, which will lead visitors to move around the park as much as possible” (Antonio Lidonnici, interview conducted by the author in December 2023).

In this context, thus, the narrative of the Calabrian territory would take shape in the intersection between the cultural identity expressed by local communities and what visitors – to be understood, by now, in prosumer terms – could return as co-narrators and, therefore, co-producers of tourist, cultural and relational scenarios.

### Smart Environment, Living and Mobility

If, according to Herrschel (2013), any territory that strives to be smart can only be characterized by the constitutive co-presence of competitiveness and sustainability, the Magna Grecia Park project envisages the construction of several clean energy production and eco-friendly waste disposal facilities (*environment*). Excess production, moreover, would be given to the surrounding area.

It is, then, an overall maneuver towards raising the quality of life (*smart living*) through providing cultural and tourism services aimed at growing social cohesion. It’s really the quality of life which is one of the most considerable weak points of the Calabrian region (**Tab. 1**), as we learn from rankings produced by the main national measuring and evaluation institutes (Casadei, Finizio, 2023).

This is coupled with a further scene of structural and infrastructural deficits: what hovers around mobility and accessibility (*smart mobility*). Circumstance that, in the opinion of a segment of the interviewed stakeholders (Spanò, 2024), could change in terms of strengthening also thanks to the incentive provided by the eventual realization of a project such as the MGP; the considerations gathered, however, are differing and no less stakeholders believe, oppositely, that the infrastructural strengthening should preempt and not succeed the realization of such an impressive maneuver, for the purpose of building – at the same time – a cultural identity (which is lacking today) and a broad attractive dimension: only a contemporary and innovative city with an updated offer can concretely enhance the available natural and historical Heritage.

QUALITY OF LIFE	CALABRIA	CROTONE
Total amount	99°	103°
Wealth	98°	107°
Employment	81°	96°
Lawfulness/Safety	72°	80°
Demography / Society	81°	86°
Environment / Public Services	92°	94°
Culture	100°	99°

**Table 1** Calabria’s quality of life  
Source: Author’s compilation based on data collected by ISTAT.



## Final remarks

It seems, also from the outcome of the stakeholder analysis (Spanò, 2024), that the realization of the MGP can bring substantial benefits to the Calabrian territory and that it can, in addition, facilitate the activation of an innovative form of tourism for the Calabria region, which is not particularly far from what is required by the most recent guidelines in terms of smartness. Nonetheless – as I side before – it's necessary to take stock of the situation of the territory within which it should stand, taking into consideration strengths and weaknesses and, above all, considering that Calabrian tourism is currently mostly and markedly summer and seasonal. Can it be successful, the realization of the MGP, to reverse the course (condition for its existence)? Does such a structure possess the power to fuel a process of reconversion the entire region's mobility (*mobility*), which today is certainly lacking and a point of weakness in terms of tourism possibilities? The MGP project shows itself, then, to be especially close to the environmental sustainability standards (*environment*) and participatory processes (governance and people); as well as near to a vision that results in a mission to ensure a significant improvement in the quality of life of the entire region, which is not particularly high, according to the most recent measurements.

To this day, it is difficult to estimate if the MGP will be realized and based on what formulation. It is possible, however, to work on this possible world, given the inextricable relationship between what could be, or somehow is, and what is already there (Pievani, 2024). From this point of view, which as suggested by the Italian writer Italo Calvino connects the various articulations of knowledge (Bucciantini, 2023), the geographic discipline can provide many starting points, inasmuch critical perspective on the complex meeting system between the biosphere and the social and cultural sphere (Dematteis, 2021). The chance to build alternative models of reality that – in this as in other cases – aim at the socio-economic development of a territory through the cultural channel, also emerges from the analysis of one of the possible developments of the reality. An inevitably partial model (De Rubertis, 2021) but one that allows us to think and act in terms of improvements. From the tourism point of view, it seems imperative today to do so by following in the path traced by the Smartness standards.

In this framework, it is appropriate to avoid proposing possible worlds characterized by an overly oleographic narrative of the territory's heritages, and to watch out for those visions that see technological innovation to the bitter end as the panacea for all ills and the only possible medium to structuring a supposedly happy destination. In other words: it is necessary to work within concreteness, where – as Berque highlights – “*Concretus* in Latin is the past participle of *concrecere*: to grow together” (Berque, 2019, p. 58; translation by the author). Despite the obstacles, it seems that a project like the MGP can launch this overall movement even in a difficult territory like Calabria. Anyway, it is a possible model that, nowadays, permits an analysis of the territory and building development lines between productive and impassable paths. Until a new model takes the place of the current one.

## Conflicts of Interests

The author declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.



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