



**POLITECNICO  
DI TORINO**

# Honors thesis

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Master of Science in Architecture Construction City

*Abstract*

## **Onsen & Thermal Baths – Learning from Japan to Regenerate a Thermal Site in Italy**

*Tutor/Correlator*

Simonetta Lucia Pagliolico  
Pierre Alain Croset  
Toshiki Hirano

*By*

Cristina Mordegli

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The exploitation of hot water for religious, relaxation and medical purposes, represents an eradicated tradition in Japan. Favoured by its geology and location, the nation counts thousands of springs and bathing facilities, accessed, on a daily basis, by multitudes of natives and tourists. Among the available typologies, onsen represent the most interesting establishments. Their fascination, in fact, transcends the attractiveness of relaxation: the process of bathing, imposing a rigorous etiquette, along with architectural choices and the attention to the natural environment, consist in a unique combination. Despite a strong centenary tradition, the onsen sector, after the bursting of the Economic Bubble in the 90s, has undergone a phase of crisis, mostly due to: the advent of private home baths, the reduction in payed company recreational trips and the decrease of overnight staying. In this perspective, the joint efforts of local population and Tourism Bureau have produced several measures of intervention, which have generally proven to be successful for the revitalization of more conservative and secluded onsen towns. Italian public baths, similarly, have had a long and complex history, which has culminated, after the reduction of State's subsidies, in a radical loss of popularity. However, differently from Japan, the recovery of the sector has interested only major compounds and has left smaller realities in a state of inexorable dissolution.

On the base of these reflections, this thesis initially explored the regeneration processes followed in several Japanese onsen municipalities, in order to understand the various methodologies and try to draw some guidelines for their replicability. The most common measures appeared to be: valorization of existing heritage, enhancement and preservation of natural landscape, networking among facilities and improvement of connections.

Moreover, the tendency of asking famous architects to design or renovate onsen facilities, used as a driving force for the regeneration of entire communities, also appeared to be successful. In this perspective, the regeneration of Itomachi in Saijo, Ehime Prefecture, seems to partially embody this strategy. The author of this thesis had the opportunity to collaborate on the design concept of the Onsen&Gym compound, which was briefly presented to summarize some of the principles learnt in Japan. The research work was further advanced by exploring the bathing sector in Italy, through the analysis of some successful compounds. The latter appeared to have preserved their appeal by combining the usage of hot waters for medical purposes, with their employment for beauty, relaxation and fitness ones, obtained by stressing on the idea of comprehensive thermal parks. Thus, the outcome was the selection of the dismissed Thermal Baths of Bacedasco, extremely well known during the 60s for its Park of Fons, as a case study. The concept for this regeneration project was to consider water as the driving force for the development of the compound as a series of scattered prefabricated wooden blocks. The aim was to create a sort of community, within which patients and visitors could interact and equally benefit from being immersed in water and nature. To render the solution flexible to further developments and to minimize the impact on the landscape, a prefabrication and modular strategy, along with a study on wooden based building products were carried out.

The final output demonstrates how the intercultural exchange of ideas can lead to more diversified, yet context conscious solutions to eradicated problems. Moreover, it provides an additional model for the regeneration of more secluded thermal complexes in Italy.

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