

A "Made to Measure" Data Centre Takes Shape: Pietrafitta Set to Become a Hub for Innovation

by Massimo Fellini



In Umbria, the former lignite-fuelled power station will be transformed into the Park of Contemporary Innovation, promoted by Foro delle Arti – the holding company of the Cucinelli family – together with Umbria Data Garden. The data centre will be designed to combine storage and computing capacity, with investment potentially reaching around €100 million in the most ambitious scenario, while the Regional Government has already allocated €2.5 million towards the regeneration of the site.

“We must build something solid, useful and beautiful.” Brunello Cucinelli borrows Vitruvius's words to describe the future of Pietrafitta, a hamlet in the municipality of Piegara in Umbria's Valnestore valley, some thirty kilometres from Perugia, in a region whose history has been closely bound to energy production for decades. Here, lignite extracted from the local mine once fuelled the thermoelectric power station, around which employment, families and communities grew.

Today, this vast industrial site is preparing for a second life. No longer lignite, but data, computing power and knowledge will take centre stage within the Park of Contemporary Innovation in Pietrafitta, with the new data centre as one of its

main infrastructures, around which research, healthcare, education and new opportunities for younger generations can flourish.

Beauty, however, is neither a marginal detail nor an indulgence for eccentric architects. Cucinelli recalls medieval Siena, when the beauty of the city was regarded as a matter of common interest, and every new addition was subject to rules intended to preserve and enhance its harmony. To build means leaving something better than we found it, and this should be the guiding principle behind the regeneration of Pietrafitta: recovering a part of Umbria's industrial history without erasing it, and transforming it into a place capable of speaking the language of the present.

The concept and design are being promoted and supported by Foro delle Arti, the Cucinelli family's holding company, and Umbria Data Garden, a newly established operating company created to accompany the project's development and implementation. Umbria Data Garden will be responsible for engaging industrial, technological and financial partners, attracting investors who share its vision and can contribute the expertise and resources needed for the gradual realisation of the Park of Contemporary Innovation.

The project was presented at the former Pietrafitta power station by Stefania Proietti, President of the Umbria Regional Government; Roberto Ferricelli, Mayor of Piegara; Giulio Cherubini, Mayor of Panicale; and Riccardo Stefanelli, Chief Executive Officer of Brunello Cucinelli S.p.A. and Umbria Data Garden S.r.l.



The data centre: up to €100 million for data sovereignty and computing power.

The future data centre in Pietrafitta remains an open project, and its eventual configuration will determine its size, investment requirements and role within the local area. The main question to be defined will be the balance between storage and computing capacity, two components that can coexist within the same infrastructure in different proportions, depending on market demand. On the one hand, there will be the storage of data close to those who generate and use it, thereby strengthening its control and sovereignty; on the other, computing capacity, required to make processing power available to artificial intelligence, scientific research and healthcare.

The investment will also be influenced by the type of hardware installed in each rack, which can substantially affect its value. The final configuration will therefore be adjusted to expected demand, particularly from public healthcare, research institutions and regional authorities. In a scenario in which computing capacity plays a more prominent role, investment could reach approximately €100 million.

“We have imagined a place in harmony with its surroundings and, at the same time, capable of giving space to the ideas of our century through the most innovative and sustainable technologies,” explains Riccardo Stefanelli, Chief Executive Officer of Brunello Cucinelli S.p.A. and Umbria Data Garden S.r.l. “By regenerating these spaces, we want to create an environment open to knowledge, encounter and the growth of people, one capable of preserving the memory of what has been while looking towards what is yet to come. The data centre, too, will be developed according to this principle, with a configuration that will gradually be defined in response to emerging needs and with the capacity to grow over time.”

Brunello Cucinelli also spoke at the press conference, clarifying the family's role in the project and emphasising its humanistic vocation.

“The idea is to create for Umbria a kind of made-to-measure data centre, conceived around the characteristics and needs of our region. An infrastructure which, recalling Vitruvius, must be solid, useful and beautiful; functional, robust and capable of blending harmoniously into its surroundings. I like to think that this project may also have a humanistic dimension. Just yesterday, Microsoft spoke of ‘humanistic superintelligence’, an expression that feels very close to our own vision. In some way, this could become a humanistic data centre for our region, where technology remains at the service of humanity. I would, however, like to make one point absolutely clear: the Cucinelli family will not be building the data centre. We have supported the idea and its design. Once the project has

been completed and approved, it will be necessary to identify parties, investors and partners — Italian, European and international — who are interested in taking part in its realisation.”

The project can nevertheless count on several particularly favourable features of the site, beginning with approximately seven hectares of available land, a high-voltage electrical substation, a fibre-optic backbone and the water reservoirs associated with its former industrial activity. Together, these elements make it possible to envisage a gradual and scalable development. Installed capacity, energy consumption, cooling systems and environmental impact have not yet been defined. They will form part of the technical design required to reach the authorisation stage.

Demand could initially come from the local area itself: from public healthcare and research to universities, public administrations and Umbrian businesses, all of which could have access both to data-storage services and to advanced computing capacity. One possibility that has emerged is to reserve a share of the capacity for start-ups and university spin-offs, which today may need to purchase computing power from major international providers. In this scenario, Pietrafitta would become not merely a place where data are stored and processed, but also an infrastructure serving research and fostering the creation of new technology companies within the region.



A hub for innovation in Umbria.

The data centre, however, will be only one element of a far broader transformation of the former industrial site. Wherever possible, existing buildings and structures will be restored and integrated with new spaces dedicated to research, education and business, with the long-term aim of creating a genuine hub for innovation. The new Pietrafitta site does not aspire to become yet another efficient but impersonal technology park, built without regard for its surroundings. Rather, it seeks to become a place where private capital, industrial expertise, research and institutions can come together.

“Our intention is to create together a strategic ecosystem in which future generations of innovators can be born and flourish,” comments Stefania Proietti, President of the Umbria Regional Government. “After more than twenty years, the Umbria Regional Government is making available the resources necessary to begin regenerating this area. We have already allocated €2.5 million, through published measures, to intervene on part of the site through demolition, remediation and the repurposing of existing spaces, making room for the future Innovation Park. The aim is also to accompany Umbria towards greater data sovereignty, equipping ourselves with computing capacity and with the ability to process and safeguard data through infrastructures over which we can exercise direct control. In the international situation we are experiencing, having our own infrastructure and backup systems at our disposal assumes even greater importance. The regeneration will also have to proceed while safeguarding the elements of industrial archaeology placed under the protection of the heritage authorities, which form part of the history and memory of this place. Some structures will therefore be preserved and restored, while others will be demolished or transformed. The timetable will be established during the subsequent stages, but we estimate that the regeneration works could take approximately one year.”

Finally, Pietrafitta also reaffirms a vision of contemporary philanthropy that extends beyond traditional support for art and culture. At a time when technology is concentrating capital, infrastructure and power in a small number of hands, choosing to invest in a territory, in research and in human capabilities means giving private capital a public purpose as well. In the past, people built libraries, theatres and works of art; today, one can also help create places where knowledge is generated, young people are educated, research is conducted, and computing capacity is made available to universities, businesses and communities.