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Oltre overtourism e abbandono: progetti per nuove forme di turismo sostenibile

Au-delà du surtourisme et de l'abandon: projets pour de nouvelles formes de tourisme durable / Jenseits von Overtourismus und Verlassenheit: Projekte für neue Formen des nachhaltigen Tourismus / Onkraj prekomernega turizma in opuščanja: projekti za nove oblike trajnostnega turizma / Beyond overtourism and abandonment: projects for new forms of sustainable tourism



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From consumption to re-habitability. The Kingfisher's Nest and the slow tourism in Valtellina

This paper examines the role of minimal architecture in fostering sustainable tourism in Alpine regions, through the project The Kingfisher's Nest, designed by Marco Ghilotti in 2020 on Isola della Pescaia (Valtellina, Italy). Historically, Alpine areas shifted from productive landscapes to tourism-oriented economies, often privileging consumption over ecological and social balance. In response, recent design approaches aim to reframe mountains as spaces to reinhabit, especially through learning and community engagement.

In particular, the project by Marco Ghilotti transforms a small historic barn into an educational centre connected with the cycle-pedestrian path of Sentiero Valtellina. Through precise architectural, functional, and grafting choices, the Kingfisher's Nest exemplifies a replicable model for Alpine regeneration: small-scale, low-impact architecture that enhances local identity, promotes environmental education, and supports a slow tourism culture rooted in place-based knowledge.

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Keywords

Slow tourism, Kingfisher's Nest, Alps, Isola della Pescaia, minimal architecture.

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Opening picture

The cycle/pedestrian path touching the project area, November 2021 (photo Giacomo Albo).

Fig. 1

Kingfisher's Nest, December 2020 (photo Giacomo Albo).

Fig. 2

The building before the intervention, January 2016 (photo Marco Ghilotti Architetto).

Mountain regions, traditionally defined by a balance between the natural environment and local productive practices, have undergone a profound shift in their trajectory since the second half of the nineteenth century, with modernisation and expansion of the capitalist economy. After the season of *houille blanche*, which brought significant infrastructural transformations to mountain slopes, the second half of the twentieth century marked a further loss of productive centrality in favour of valleys. In this context, a culture of tourism and heritage-making (De Rossi, 2022, p. 16) gradually emerged, often driven by forces external to the territories and prioritising their consumption over

social and ecological functions. Although economically profitable, this model has generated several imbalances, overshadowing alternative forms of development.

Over the past thirty years, however, growing attention to sustainability, the climate crisis, and the need to rebuild more balanced relationships with the land has redefined the role of tourism. Mountains are increasingly understood as places to be re-inhabited rather than merely consumed: laboratories for practices that offer a valid alternative to the city (Dematteis, 2016), and potential grounds for responsible tourism rooted in local knowledge. In this scenario, architectural design culture takes on



Fig. 3

Territorial plan. The building, in red, is located on Isola della Pescaia, at the foot of the Valtellina slope, northwest of the town of Cosio Valtellino, along the stretch of the Adda River that separates it from the municipality of Traona (drawing Marco Ghilotti Architetto, 2020).

Fig. 4

Isola della Pescaia before the architectural intervention, September 2016 (photo Giacomo Albo).

a strategic role: no longer a tool to fuel landscape consumption, but a lever for generating conscious forms of hospitality, enhancing local materials and techniques, and integrating tourism activities into a broader process of collective care and education. Starting from these premises, the Kingfisher's Nest by Marco Ghilotti, realised in 2020 on Isola della Pescaia in the municipality of Cosio Valtellino (Italy), is a notable case study (Fig. 1). Already its name, "nest", evokes the idea of a small architecture located at the margins, an *objet trouvé* with primitive and natural characters. Commissioned by the Comunità Montana Valtellina di Morbegno, the project brings together several components: the natural one, represented by the water and the local fauna; the historical one, embodied by the pre-existing ancient barn, main object of the intervention; and finally the social one, involving different categories of users, from tourists to inhabitants. Thus, architecture prompts a co-evolutionary gesture which, despite its limited physical impact, establishes extended and stable relationships between nature, community, and rural heritage. The project is set on Isola della Pescaia, at the foot of the sunlit slope of the Valtellina (Figs. 3-4). At

the end of the fifteenth century, a system of wooden barriers allowed fish to be easily trapped, making fishing one of the area's most profitable economic activities and opening the island to trade. Although these systems no longer exist, the place has kept its role as a natural and strategic connection within the surrounding landscape. Indeed, a new chapter in the island's history began in 2014 with the completion of the Sentiero Valtellina, a 100 km cycle-pedestrian path linking Colico to Bormio with a gentle gradient, now widely used by locals and visitors alike (Opening picture). The construction of two footbridges further strengthened the island's role as a key link between the two banks of the Adda River in Traona and Cosio Valtellino. In 2017, the Comunità Montana Valtellina di Morbegno, which owns a section of the trail, launched a call for proposals to reuse an old barn located just north of the path (Fig. 2). Marco Ghilotti was selected to carry out the project. Rather than converting the rural building for purely commercial purposes, serving only trail users, the project looked for a more enduring role, engaging the local community as well. In fact, in collaboration with the owners, the designer transformed



Fig. 5
South elevation
and open space
connecting the
building to the cycle
path, November 2020
(photo Giacomo Albo).

Fig. 6
Ground floor plan
(drawing Marco
Ghilotti Architetto,
2020).

Fig. 7
Details of wall
thickness and
window frame
placement, November
2020 (photo Giacomo
Albo).

Fig. 8
Longitudinal
section through the
classroom (drawing
Marco Ghilotti
Architetto, 2020).

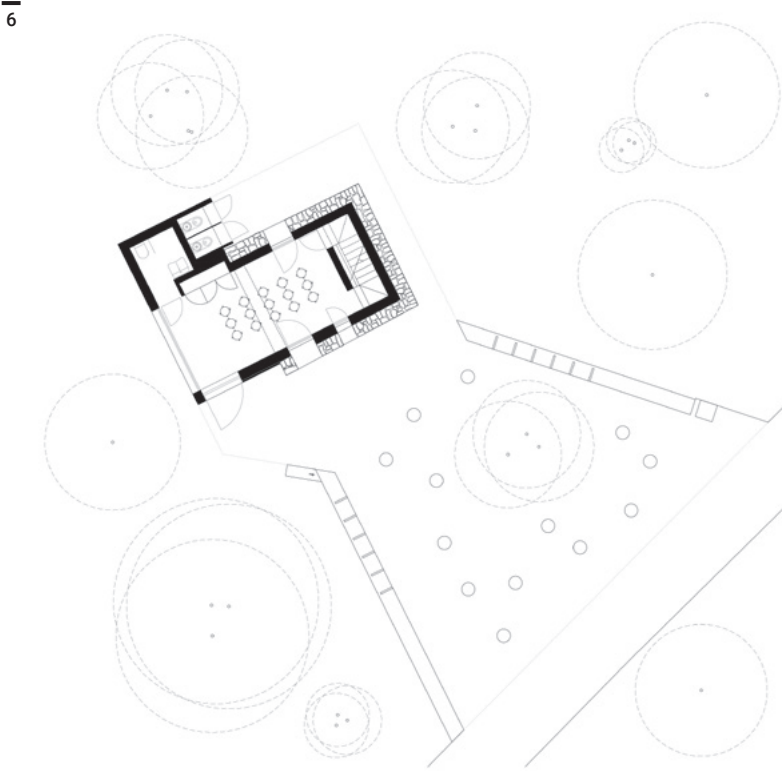
the building into an educational classroom, accessible to school groups, local nature associations, and visitors of the cycle-pedestrian path. Thus, the old barn has become a naturalistic centre dedicated to environmental education, public outreach, and enhancement of Isola della Pescaia. This function aligns with the island's natural character: the presence of the Adda River, the richness of flora and fauna, and the fact that the site is accessible only on foot or by bicycle, make it ideal for slow tourism, based on observation, learning, and a deeper connection with nature, rather than merely serving as a brief stopping point.

Drawing on the inherent essence of the site, the project aims to safeguard the identity of the existing structure, a small building measuring 5.5×5.3 m in plan and rising to a height of 6.4 m, and to establish, through it, a respectful dialogue with the surrounding natural context (Grecchi et al., 2025). This intention is also expressed in the redesign of the public space, conceived as a *calcestre* diaphragm that wraps around three sides of the building and reaches the edge of the pedestrian-cycle path (Figs. 5-6). This layer is interrupted only by two rectangular wooden benches, a few timber cylinders anchored into the ground, and a small

fountain, an essential presence in rural architecture. In fact, water has always been the nourishment of mountain villages (Nigro, 2020), declining into small architectures like fountains, *lavoirs*, or troughs.

The architectural, material, and technological choices likewise pursue this ongoing meta-design dialogue, which expresses itself through the coherence of each element. The need for a larger space to be used as a teaching room led to the replacement of the adjoining, non-protected portion of the building with a new volume, which, while respecting the original footprint, breaks the boundary between the two bodies to create a more generous classroom on the ground floor (Figs. 8-9). This space is defined by a large, glazed façade that serves as a filter between the interior experience and the natural setting of the park, breaking down the boundary between the two spaces and allowing the outdoor experience to permeate the building (Fig. 10). The new volume is materially and technologically distinct: it features an XLAM timber structure clad with 2 cm larch boards, charred on-site using an open flame. This natural blackening, not a painted finish, gives the compact volume a contemporary yet balanced character.





The theme of timber, conceived as a “box within the box”, also reappears in the main volume, where rough, live-sawn oak boards form the internal cladding of a cellular-glass insulation layer, itself connected to a concrete structure that ties into the stone masonry. This internal thickness, a response to the complex requirements of thermal insulation and seismic retrofitting, essential for the building’s public use, reinforces the decision to preserve the original relationship between solid and void. Glazed openings are therefore connected to the structural inner box, avoiding alterations to the essence of the building and enhancing the existing recesses (Fig. 7).

The preservation of the stone envelope also guided the redesign of the roof. Given the need for a substantial insulation package, and in order not to disrupt the proportions of the building, the entire buildup is concealed within the thickness of the wall, leaving only the metal coping visible, slightly raised above the envelope.

By synthesising precise architectural, functional, and grafting choices, the Kingfisher’s Nest fosters the coexistence of resources, actors, and experiences within a genuine “return to slowness”. In fact, as Paolo Pileri argues, the Covid-19 pandemic and the increasingly hectic rhythms of contemporary urban life have led us to rediscover slowness as a universal right and a common good (Pileri, 2020), challenging speed as the dominant social norm (Rosa, 2015) and offering a foundation for living and inhabiting well. Positioned within this theoretical and operational framework, the project reframes tourism as a driver of development for Alpine territories, still affected by depopulation and the abandonment of built and landscape heritage.

In particular, the restoration of the former barn on the beautiful setting of the Isola della Pescaia exemplifies a transversal design approach: spatially, by weaving together rural heritage, slow-mobility infrastructures, water resources, and local ecological habitats; temporally, by creating a structure usable in all seasons and thus countering the rigidi-





ty of one-directional, highly seasonal tourism; and socially, by opening the space to tourists and residents of all ages, including local associations active in the area.

In addition, the project's value lies in its potential replicability in other mountain areas, where resilient design culture often struggles to take root, resulting in approximate restorations and low-quality new interventions. Instead, this minimal architecture, which requires only a limited amount of financial resources, becomes a concrete action that fits into the landscape like a precious stone. The design gestures are carefully measured: the treatment of the envelope as a box, the placement of the windows in the inner structure, the transversal presence of wood, the choice of a lightweight roof that, while meeting technological needs, does not weigh down the original morphology of the ruin, and finally the decision to bring the theme of water back to the center through a simple fountain. These tiny yet meaningful actions can positively influence design sensitivity and become elements of broader territorial strategies that focus on the regeneration of "architecture without architects" (Rudofsky, 1964), fostering quality and balance.

Ultimately, this kind of intervention opens new scenarios for the Alpine context by demonstrating how

minimal, carefully placed "pearls" can generate value along the "necklace" of a touristic circuit: small, thoughtful architectural episodes that, when connected by a unifying interpretive thread, acquire new vitality and identity, collectively enriching the territory that wears them (Pileri, 2020). Within this framework, tourism is conceived not as the mere consumption of places and spaces, but as an opportunity to strengthen their re-habitability. However, the transformative potential of The Kingfisher's Nest also reveals a deeper structural question concerning the future of Alpine territories. While the project advocates for a slow form of tourism rooted in local ecologies, it simultaneously operates within a regional context where more intensive tourism models, linked to winter sport infrastructures, large-scale events, and high visitor flows, continue to dominate. Without a coherent and long-term territorial strategy that recognises minimal, place-sensitive interventions as engines of broader regeneration, projects like this risk remaining isolated "pearls": valuable, but insufficient to shift the prevailing trajectories of development. This tension calls for a collective effort to scale up the principles embodied in the project and translate them into territorial policies capable of making such micro-architectures not exceptions, but catalysts for systemic change. ■

Fig. 9

East elevation,
December 2020
(photo Giacomo
Albo).

Fig. 10

The classroom and
the glass window
overlooking the
outside space,
November 2020
(photo Giacomo
Albo).

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