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ARCHITECTURE in the ALPS

Heritage and design



edited by Davide Del Curto, Roberto Dini, Giacomo Menini



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Architecture in the Alps. Heritage, design, local development

Davide Del Curto

The relationship between the Alps and the building heritage of the twentieth century is the thread that binds the writings of this collection. The authors reflect on the role of architecture through retrospectives, attempts at synthesis and the story of their own experiences. *Absorbing Modernity* is the theme that the beginning of the millennium also puts to the Alps, which are no longer just the *Playground of Europe* where to restore mind and body from the stresses of labour, but a land of disputes, where very current issues concerning concepts such as heritage, development, community must also find an answer within a scenario of climate change.

In the confrontation between modernity and traditional knowledge, a lot of water has passed under the bridge since Adolf Loos' lucky aphorism which recommended that the architect should understand and interpret tradition, thinking like a well-informed farmer. Other attempts to process the opposition also appear to have been acquired, from the *terceira via* of Fernando Tavora to the different ways in which historical materialism has been applied to the interpretation of spatial phenomena. During the twentieth century, construction and landscape archaeology and the studies on building typologies¹ have proposed even radical positions in the face of the "inevitable" abandonment of rural settlements and have helped to update architecture as a discipline which is able to interpret the physical reality in which the human experience occurs, and to make suggestions to support

1 M. BOSSHARD, E. CONSOLASCIO, A. ROSSI, *La costruzione del territorio nel Canton Ticino*, Lugano 1979.



its development².

However, the problem nowadays is no longer that of asserting an idea of modernity intended as the ability to give current responses to the renewed request of living in the mountains and of enjoying its treasures. This perspective appears outdated in the *shrinking* and *sprawling* scenario, where the English-speaking neologisms indicate that across the Alps, as in the rest of the continent, there is no demand for new buildings and construction activities take place more in response to the economic sector's needs rather than to a new settlement demand. On the other hand, actions oriented to conservation, regeneration or replacement of what has already been built are still weak, and there are only rare cases where the more recent mainstream oriented towards efficient energy has resulted in good building conversions. The vast heritage of the twentieth century has summarily been confined to the field of the *ugly, polluted, badly executed* and it certainly requires energy performances appropriate to the current standards of sustainability, but it also calls for urgent improvements in its architectural quality and to be able to come to terms with the Alpine landscape. The weakness of this second instance, and the fact that it is only marginally shared by contemporary society leads to a crucial question: what is the role of the architect in the Alps, today?

With the flourishing of conferences concerning building in the mountains, alpine architecture awards, exhibitions and publications, architecture has been involved in discussions about the Alps for the last thirty years, both from a protection point of view and from the point of view that deals with development, which has only partially affected how that growth took place. Architecture has been replaced by engineering construction, as the technique to meet the demand for places and buildings in which to shape a certain type of society. From a cognitive point of view, architecture has been flanked by landscape studies, through which the mountain has been described and interpreted mainly on the basis of other disciplines such as geography, economics, aesthetics, geo-philosophy. The architect remains the holder of a knowledge which is difficult to define, such as the discipline with uncertain boundaries which generated him, and which can be identified in the ability to interpret the *genius loci*; architects have only in part succeeded in being credited with being the figures able to link the multiple aspects of the landscape, of society and of the construction sector; they sit at the edge of the discussion where the Alpine Macro region is planned, and their expertise translates into conferences, lectures, recommendations,

2 S. OMBELLINI, *Tradizione vs Immaginazione. Architettura contemporanea nell'area alpina. 1981-2001*, doctoral thesis, University of Parma. Department of Civil Engineering and Architecture, 2009.

and in a professional activity which is not very effective on the ways the territory is transformed³. The architect would like to recover his role of *leader* in the construction industry and in the administration of the territory, which he did not manage to conquer during the twentieth century. Unlike the thermo and the structural engineer, he is, however, still uncertain in defining his own position in the chain of Alpine *stakeholders*. Even in the Alps, architecture proves to be a “soft (or weak) science”, damaged by the recent past of the housing boom and perhaps unsuitable to solving the consequences of that period. This is the same conclusion that motivates the effort to update the thinking and actions of today’s architects, and it is necessary to avoid that the Alps should be reduced to the ground where internal disputes in the world of architecture are renewed, as in other sectors of modern thought, where the mountain has begun to acquire dignity not as such, but merely because it is functional in supporting the considerations developed by several schools of thought⁴. On the other hand, as evidenced by Bruno Reichlin, the Alps are also an international laboratory where quality architecture and a lively reflection occur on the identity of the discipline and its tools. These tools require to be substantially upgraded, even beyond a certain *social* attitude concerning participation and communication, e.g. the Renzo Piano’s “municipal” architect which should operate similarly to a medical officer in patching up suburbs. This book offers an anthology of writings concerning the activities and thoughts of architects working in the Alps, searching for the reasons why architecture should renew an active and qualifying role in transforming the territory within the on-going projects and research⁵.

Managing the controversial legacy built by fathers and grandfathers is the dimension in which architects who are now forty years old must operate. Holiday homes, sanatoriums, hotels, ski resorts, infrastructures are an immense wealth compared with what was built in these remote areas during all the previous centuries, and which for the most part, today simply no longer serve the purpose for which they were conceived. This legacy includes the samples of that modernism animated by myths and

- 3 A. GIORGI, A. BORSDOFF, G. KÖCK, T. SCHEURER (edited by), *Le risorse delle Alpi: Utilizzo, valorizzazione e gestione dal livello locale a quello macroregionale*. Atti del convegno, Darfo Boario Terme, 17-19 settembre 2014, Biblion Edizioni, Milano 2014.
- 4 L. MOCARELLI, *Dalla montagna immaginata alla montagna vissuta. La percezione degli abitanti del piano tra rappresentazioni idealtipiche e realtà (secoli XVI-XX)*, in J. MATHIEU, S. BOSCANI LEONI (edited by), *Die Alpen! Zur europäischen Wahrnehmungsgeschichte seit der Renaissance-Les Alpes! Pour une histoire de la perception européenne depuis la Renaissance*, Peter Lang, Bern, 2015 pp. 115-128.
- 5 M. MULAZZANI, F. CHIORINO, *Vivere le Alpi. Materiali per una ricerca*, Rubbettino Editore, Soveria Mannelli, 2015.

various impulses which marked the different stages of colonising the Alps, both when they were built, and even more so when they remained fine words on paper as visionary projects⁶. There are works of great quality and likely to be promoted to a heritage *status*, regardless of their age, such as the Seehotel Ambach by Othmar Barth, presented by Wolfgang von Klebelsberg. Others which should be placed on the difficult path to recovery, regeneration, redevelopment or any other variation of the re-plus positive suffix, which would like to make a stand for a vital reaction to the inactivity produced by abandonment, according to which «getting lost and perishing, is more moral than preserving»⁷. What to do with a large abandoned sanatorium? And with the Hotel Paradiso by Giò Ponti in Val Martello, thoroughly studied by Luciano Bolzoni? With the Eni Village in Borca di Cadore, where Gianluca d'Inca Levis and Dolomiti Contemporanee are setting up a new and energising cultural site? With the Ski resorts on both sides of the Alps, whose history, construction aspects and territorial dimension Yvan Delemontey, Caterina Franco and Rosa Tamborrino comprehensively describe? In the meanwhile, the traditional buildings, already photographed by Giuseppe Pagano and Mario Cereghini, are almost completely lost due to heinous demolitions, neglect and lack of maintenance, as pointed out by Dario Benetti. These treasures that we have shunned for a long time in order to follow the lure of modern concrete, polymers and ribbon windows, are now a rarity, and there is no option but to try to preserve them scrupulously, promoting sustainable and widespread forms of use and consecrating the most intact examples as museums.

Capaul&Blumenthal, Conradin Clavuot and Armando Ruinelli show us how it is possible to carry out quality architecture in the Grisons, thanks to a professional activity stably based on operational research which dedicates a certain amount of time and intellectual resources to each project, superior to other contexts where - no use denying it - the same job is paid less and within the economy of an architectural studio, the duties of meeting the turnover subtract energy from the quality of the project. From Lower Raetia, Simone Cola responds with a group photo of architects born in the mid-sixties who brought the lessons learned from the masters in lowland universities to the Valtellina, purified from all formalism and other academic sins and renewing the disenchanting balance between internationalism and the search for local identity. Enrico Scaramellini shows us how even an intervention on banal buildings provides the opportunity to

6 *Alpi, luoghi da sogno. Proiezioni e progetti utopici*, exhibit curated by Susanne Stacher, Merano 30 May - 7 September 2014.

7 T. MANN, *La montagna incantata*, translated by Ervino Pocar, Il Corbaccio, Milano 2004, p. 524.

metabolise the uncertain legacy of the twentieth century and to requalify the extraordinary alpine landscape where they were clumsily placed. This is an extraordinary opportunity for active repentance for a whole generation of architects, called to intervene on what is left of a misunderstood concept of modernity: design-less summer homes in blocks of concrete and polystyrene, rustic houses badly deformed by speculative logics, left-over ruined infrastructures. From a wide selection of experiences, Roberto Dini distils important reflections on how to reactivate the built heritage and in a kind of chicane through naiveties and distortions, he shows how it is possible to interpret the mainstream of saving energy at all costs, as a *chance* to improve the architectural quality of what has been built, or more simply, “to do architecture”⁸. This consists in understanding and identifying the design of the new elements among the various themes of the project and in extending the lifespan of the buildings, in a perspective entirely in line with the other mainstream of our time, that is sustainability. By redeveloping the built heritage, ruins are forestalled and the energy-intensive treatment of the rubble is contained. The improvement which elevates a stock building without qualities to the rank of architecture, is obtained through the proper tools of the discipline: architectural design and project, i.e., with the specific skills of the architect and in this sense as well, the built heritage must be considered in its true meaning of witness or link between past and future, between memory and development.

From a discipline point of view, there is once again the opportunity to overcome the stale juxtaposition between project supporters and heritage defenders, even in the Alps. Architects feel equally crippled by mutilations wrought by those who continue to act in defiance of the culture of the project or even in the absence of a project. It should by now be established that the project always contains a destructive component, which also exists in the conservation project, to the extent to which preserving means wisely administering the transformation of things and their uses, focusing on the possibility of maintaining, rather than dispersing, valuable resources because they are not infinite, in a logic that today we would define as sustainability. This consists in focusing on the converging points between protection and architectural project around the concept of quality, putting aside outdated differences in front of the increasing amount of obsolete and vulnerable buildings which has been poured over the Alps, in spite of that dispute. Similarly, the sterile exegesis on the hendiadys heritage&project, heritage-for-development, conservation&valorisation, demonstrates how

8 M. BERTA, F. CORRADO, A. DE ROSSI, R. DINI, *Architettura e territorio alpino. Scenari di sviluppo e di riqualificazione energetico-edilizia del patrimonio costruito*, Editore Regione Piemonte, Torino 2015.

studies concerning the impact of cultural heritage on the European society, its culture, economy and environment⁹ are far from the most prominent architectural culture and how the poor knowledge of the physical nature of existing buildings is the basis of the difficulty in recognising them as a heritage¹⁰. From a legal point of view, finally, it is worth to remind as the concept of heritage is the basis of the modern European identity, and that preservation activities consist in protecting the value of the heritage for the benefit of everyone, including of those who feel crippled by this protection, because it is a limit to the possibility of an immediate exploitation, by an individual or a group. Conservation means protecting the value of an asset from clumsy or rash actions and, in the perspective of the climate change, from specific risk factors, allowing the possibility of accessing it in the future.

Two visions have now been reconfirmed concerning the different facets of “Alpine Heritage”, both presuming the same awareness of the value of the Alps as a place of enchantment or as the ground to carry out neo-positively art and technology. This is an underlying theme which we find already in the romantic juxtaposition between Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc, so for the Alps too: *le mot et la chose sont modernes*. Viollet-le-Duc considered the Mont Blanc the greatest monument in Europe, and the peaks of the Alps successive different corrupted gradations of an original geometric perfection of which they nevertheless remain the guardians, just like the interrupted and corroded great cathedrals which bore witness to the wisdom of their medieval masters and which therefore deserved to be completed. The great architect did not extend the same integration purpose to the mountain peaks until 1917, when Bruno Taut suggested their utopian interpretation, with the projects of the dome on the Resegone or of the glass globe on Monte Rosa. John Ruskin, on the other side, had travelled with his parents in the Alps since he was a pupil, and they had impressed his extraordinary sensitivity and were painted in his famous watercolours of sweet and terrible landscapes, in any case magnificent and uncorrupted, therefore worthy of protection from any modern attempt of penetration and exploitation.

That modern idea of the Alps, is now confirmed as a balance between two contrasting and complementary visions: on the one hand there is a world of images, sounds and flavours that recall very ancient times, immune to today's ups and downs; on the other, there are our lives, productive and

- 9 J. SANETRA-SZELIGA (on behalf of the CHCfE Consortium), *Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe*, Published on behalf of the CHCfE Consortium by the International Cultural Centre, Krakow 2015.
- 10 S. MORONI, *Beni di nessuno, beni di alcuni, beni di tutti: note critiche sull'incerto paradigma dei beni comuni*, in «Scienze Regionali», n. 3, 2015, pp. 137-144.

compulsive, oriented towards rational exploitation of the immense treasures that the Alps guard: water, energy, raw materials, atmospheric carbon, pure air and regenerating silence, to be administered in brief and fleeting stays. This dichotomy rests on the shared vision of the Alps as “heritage” i.e., as an existing a priori subject in respect of the various attempts at modernising, exploiting and reducing attempted by modern man. It is a heritage which must be understood, feared, challenged but also protected, not so much and not only because it is threatened, but also because its very existence represents a necessary alter-ego of the multitude which flocks its slopes, along the pre-alpine megalopolis which develops seamlessly from Munich to Grenoble, from Turin to Trieste. The Alps have not been one of the Planet’s unexplored places in globetrotters’ accounts for a long time now. Nevertheless, the region that extends from the Maritime Alps to the Tatra Mountains contains a world which is still largely non-urbanised and with a low human presence. This cold and spiky region, which we see with unchanged deference from an airplane porthole, extends just a few kilometres from our busy lives, as a «foreign country»¹¹ imposing and alien, no longer inhuman but still capable of scaring, yet sweet and sublime that seems to cherish, in the purity of its rock crystal, a balance beyond the transient frenzy of human affairs and their constant search for meaning.

Panos Mantziaras suggests the inspiring image of contemporary Alps as an ecological and semantic *buffer* in the heart of the world’s most urbanised, populated and stratified continent, which supplies oxygen, pure water, and entertainment venues. It reminds us of the transitional season of cheap energy and induces us to reflect on the mainstream of sustainability, which rests on the awareness that resources are not endless and identifies the Alps as a common material and immaterial heritage to be preserved and handed down.

Antonio De Rossi and Federica Corrado remind us that the Alps are an early European heritage, today identified with the image of a geographically across-the-board, politically transnational Macroregion, yet analogous to many of the aspects of daily life. By illustrating the case of Oстана in Piedmont, Massimo Crotti shows how architecture is called upon to develop updated responses to the renewed demand for working, moving to and living in the mountains, definitively overcoming the mere exploitation-oriented approach which has characterised the lengthy colonisation of the Alps by modern society. It is not necessary to build on a mountain pasture in order to enjoy the Alps and thus Luca Gibello climbs in a brilliant synthesis through an ideal ascension towards the high lands of the mountain huts. Here, architecture’s dual character of permanence and impermanence,

11 D. LOWENTHAL, *The past is a foreign country*, Cambridge University Press, 1985.

is highlighted by the presence of the great and eternal mountain masses.

The Alps are made of mountains and according to Petrarch, they are the «screen that nature placed between us and the German anger», while today they increasingly represent the meeting place between valleys, between east and west, and also between the north and south of Europe, like a *mare nostrum* where to renew internal dialogue and the relations with the neighbouring worlds. These are certainly partially disenchanted mountains, from the moment when modernity took away their mystery and fascination, as occurred for the night when electric light was invented. However, mountains are still capable of producing awe, wonder and fear. No longer unknown, they are still threatening and increasingly threatened by the looming perspective of climate change and yet still magical, that is, possessed of intact virtues capable of producing in man a surge of repentance that causes him to develop more sustainable relationships and ones which, basically, are more human.

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Fig. 1. *Villa Garbald*, Castasegna, Switzerland (Gottfried Semper 1863; extension by Miller&Maranta 2004)

On the next page

Fig. 2. Alpine landscape, 1950s chocolate box

