

Living in the high mountains. The Village of Canosio in the Maira valley; the Restoration and Renovation of Casa Corte

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This work is part of the age-old debate on the uses of the Alpine resources. In particular, it refers to the historical, cultural and architectural context of the Maira valley.

The Piedmontese Alps are characterised by the presence of many valleys. The choice of the Maira valley among all of them has been influenced by the presence of at least two distinguishing factors:

- its extensive and variously structured morpho-geographical configuration,
- its marked "isolation", that determined the preservation of the valley's fundamental characteristics in time.

Thus, if on the one side, the natural 'conservatism' of the Alpine environment prevented this valley from becoming 'accustomed' to 'obeying' the rules of mass-tourism and of industrialisation, on the other, the rough wild, almost closed character of the valley has been preserved. Even though, in the past, this situation favoured the rise of strong self-sufficient autonomies, with the passing of time, it has been the main cause for the emigration of its inhabitants.

A general outlook on the valley's history helps to explain several of its various artistic, cultural and architectural distinctive features. In particular, it helped us to better understand its residents' way of life and, at the same time, to identify what phases determined the buildings' differentiation, over the years, from high- to lowlands and between the different lateral narrow valleys that characterise its geographical configuration.

We thoroughly examined some of the valley's unique features, such as the round columns and we analysed the development of the "case-villaggio" (village-houses) located in the lateral valleys of Marmora and Canosio. The case-villaggio can be regarded as primordial jointly-owned blocks of flats that originated from the habit of grouping together, rather freely, both private and common areas under one single roof, the structure of which could vary greatly depending on the site.

Likewise, the "art of building" with wood, as it developed in the Maira valley area, has been meticulously investigated. We concentrated in particular on the study of the two opposite lateral valleys of Elva and Canosio. The survey, completed by the most detailed pictures and by written explanations, describes the building elements, construction techniques and devices used for achieving effective operative results. These very same elements have also been useful comparative elements in the

realisation of our project. In this respect, the analysis of one last element has also proven of great importance, that is: the architectural experience of the last century, characterised by such exponents as Le Mèze, Mollino, Albini, Gabetti & Isola, Zumthor, and Herzog.

The project proposes the restoration and renovation of Casa Corte, a casa-villaggio located in the village of Canosio. It outlines a modern interpretation of the coexistence of work areas and dwellings that characterised the building's evolution until the 1950s.

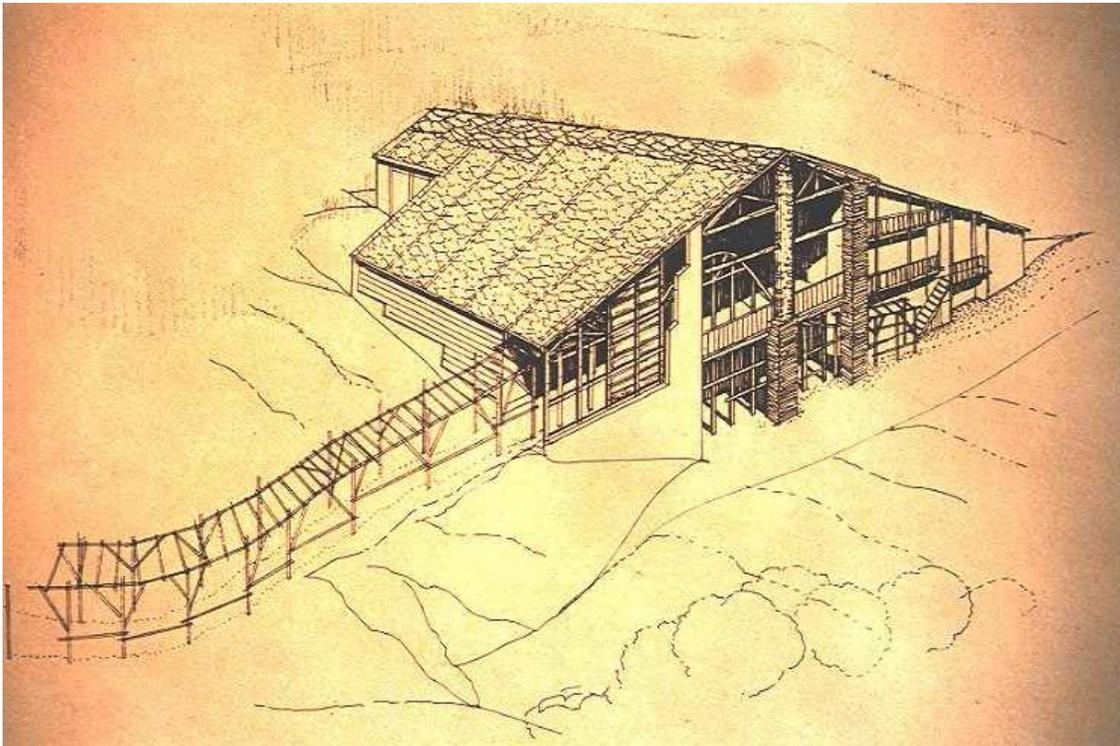


Casa Corte: overall view

The new development perspectives of the Maira valley, linked to its participation in international programmes, the completely unexplored possibilities offered by computers in the field of communication and data management, and the example of big companies such as Ittierre of Pettoranello, near Macerata (Italy) are substantial elements that led us to assert the feasibility of a multifunctional cultural centre appropriate for the fulfilment of professional activities as well as of study and research works, capable of giving hospitality to one or more work groups at least on a temporary basis. It seems to us that the combination of tradition and innovation as well as the combination of natural scenery and the world of virtual is a possible development perspective for the future of a valley which is already rich in unique features.

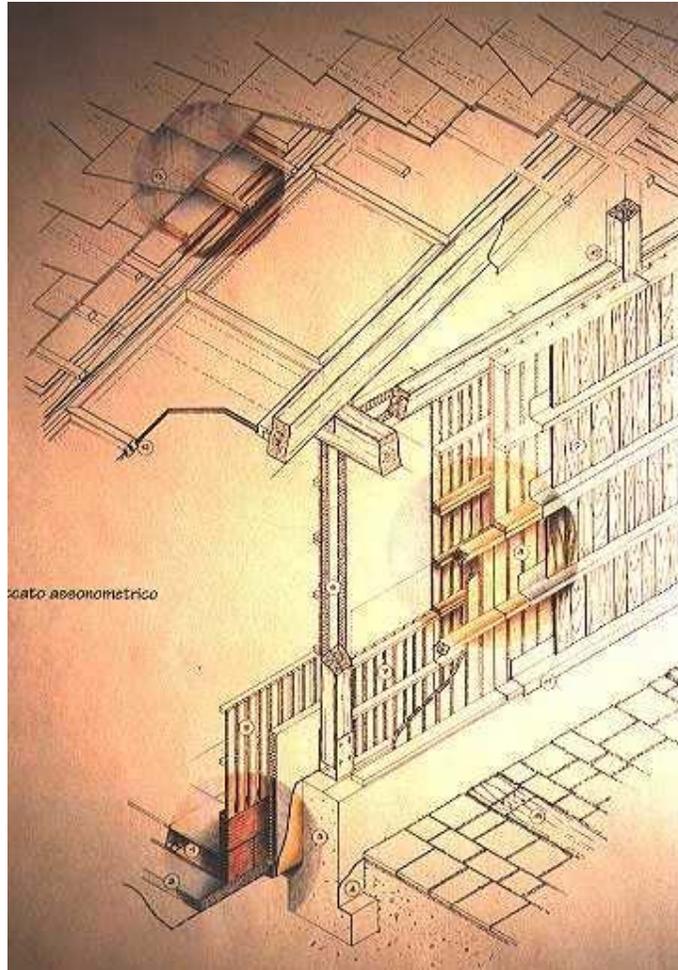
The renovation and restoration of the existing building has been developed around the primitive covered courtyard and completed by the reconstruction of ancient volumes starting from visible traces. The courtyard thus becomes a sort of inner "square": the users' meeting point and a reception area, the filter and the link

connecting the accommodation facilities to the work-places, the mountain refuge and the surrounding environment. The whole complex is linked to the existing road system through an ideal extension of the roof which, like a snake, zigzagging along the mountain slopes, enters the building and goes up the internal stairways before continuing its way towards the woods.



Site plan: perspective sketch

New volumes have been designed in such a way as to allow a wide use of cheap recycled materials, easy to find and to assemble even though not specifically representative of the present-day building industry. An example is provided by the combination of wooden pallets and insulating panels in the construction of the external walls, or by the use of transparent roofing sections (made of glass or lexan) in the covering and of old rail-road ties in the pedestrian walkways. These solutions are also an attempt to renew the tradition of self-construction by using modern materials.



The new volumes: axonometric section plan

1) floating floor; 2) subfloor; 3) reinforced concrete curb; 4) waterproofing; 5) 85X85 cm furnace pallets; 6) insulating material; 7) 80X80 cm furnace pallets; 8) 130X130 cm "Europa" pallets; 9) groove-and-tongue jointed wooden roofing tiles nailed on pallets; 10) load-bearing structure; 11) bent metal sheets; 12) wooden framework; 13) transparent "losa stone"-like elements; 15) railroad ties.