

Remodeling ruins to preserve rural heritage

July 9 2019, by Nathalie Jollien



Credit: EPFL / Patrick Giromini

Around 120 architecture students, including some from EPFL, took part in a unique workshop on Mount Luzzone in Ticino on 6–7 July 2019. They remodeled the ruins of an ancient hamlet in order to preserve an important—and fading—element of this Alpine heritage.

Luzzone, located some 2,150 meters high in Ticino's Malvaglia valley, was a small hamlet used by mountain herders and their livestock. It was

abandoned in the 1950s and today lies mostly in [ruins](#). But this past weekend, the [workshop](#)'s 120 participants teamed up to restore and remodel the ancient structures.

Of the hamlet's original ten buildings, one is still being used, one is falling down and six others are in ruins. "These functional buildings were made entirely of stone and measured just four meters long by four meters wide. They served as stables and as mountain huts for herders during the summer and were typical of life in the Alps, and especially Ticino, at the time," says Patrick Giromini, a Ph.D. [student](#) in [architecture](#) and assistant at EPFL's Arts of Sciences Laboratory (LAPIS) and one of the workshop organizers.

Remodeling, not rebuilding

The students first identified the original layout of the buildings' walls—which are now nothing more than piles of stones. Any stones sitting outside the perimeter of the hamlet were carried back to their original structures and used to rebuild some of the walls. This helped restore the volumes of the original buildings. Rather than reconstructing the buildings, however, the students put their creative juices to work in order to remodel them.

Ticino architect and EPFL graduate Martino Pedrozzi (pedrozzi.com) came up with the idea for the project. Currently a guest lecturer at the Mendrisio Academy of Architecture at the Università della Svizzera Italiana (USI), he has been involved in this kind of remodeling work for over 20 years. "There are many examples of this rural heritage scattered throughout the Alps, not just in Ticino. The question is, what should we do with these ruins? Given their remote locations, they are virtually useless. But by remodeling them, we can give them a purpose: to serve as landmarks. That is a function they once had but have since lost," he says.

The students' project therefore aimed not just at preserving the region's heritage, but also at bringing it to people's attention and underscoring the importance of our rural memory. "It also introduced the students to the rigors of rural life. Every summer, for example, the farmers had to repair snow damage," says Giromini.

Surprisingly popular

The workshop was run jointly by three Swiss architecture schools: the Mendrisio Academy of Architecture at USI, EPFL's architecture department and ETH Zurich's Institute for Spatial and Landscape Development. This was the first time these three schools teamed up for a workshop. The project also received support from the municipality of Serravalle, where the ruins are located.

"We expected around 30 students to sign up—ten from each school. But we ended up with 120 people on the registration list. We never thought our workshop would be so popular!" says Nicola Braghieri, head of EPFL's architecture department and of LAPIS.

An unforgettable experience

The workshop also gave the students a chance to team up with peers from a variety of backgrounds. They travelled from Mendrisio, Lausanne and Zurich to the foot of Mount Luzzone, which they hiked up for 90 minutes to reach the ruins. After spending the day remodeling the hamlet, they camped out there for the night. "A workshop like this is always a unique experience and I enjoy them every time," says Agathe Loeb, a Master's student in architecture at EPFL and program participant. "You usually meet people from different schools and even different countries, who bring an entirely different perspective on architecture. Speaking with them can be really interesting—it opens your

mind and breaks you out of your routine ways of thinking." Not to mention that the entire experience—from performing back-breaking work to camping out in rustic conditions—is bound to leave a lasting impression.

While this particular workshop involved remodeling stone structures in Ticino, the same format could be used for just about any kind of abandoned heritage site in the Alps. "At LAPIS, we have been studying the preservation of mountain huts and pastures for five years now, mainly in the canton of Valais. But since many of those structures are made from wood in addition to stone, we would have to adapt the workshop format slightly. It's definitely something worth considering," says Braghieri.

Provided by Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne

Citation: Remodeling ruins to preserve rural heritage (2019, July 9) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-07-remodeling-rural-heritage.html>

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