

## **THE PATIENT SEARCHING OF NEW FORMS OF LOCAL ARCHITECTURE Micro-intervention as the strategy of preservation of *genius loci* in Grison**

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### **Abstract**

*The research concerns methods of preservation of significant values of cultural landscape in the area of Grisons. These methods comprise both multi-stage urban planning regulations as well as ingenuity of architects focused on the development of local building traditions and protection of historical buildings. Architectural micro-interventions play an important function here. They limit excessive expansion of towns and villages and at the same time preserve the historical structures and development outline. The method of patient search for the right spatial and formal solutions has developed under the negotiatory nature of cooperation of the architects and the inhabitants and the perception of a commune as a client/investor. Thus, despite changes, any activities in the social and architectural spheres represent continued identification with a place. Confrontation of new trends, tendencies and ideology with strong and deeply felt tradition and environment deemed to be a significant value, verifies the assumptions of such new trends or tendencies, and in consequence adjusts or rejects them respectively. Changes are introduced on the condition that they are well thought of and blended with the historical and cultural continuum*

**Keywords:** urban planning, commune, microintervention

### **Introduction**

Architecture of Grisons, based on local traditions and identity, is at present undergoing changes, which mainly consist in the levelling of differences between town and village and in increased mobility driven by education, work and consumption. Population increase with simultaneous increase of the living standards is also important, this, in turn, generates an increase of scale and intensiveness of all the investments concerned. Harmonious introduction of modern architectural forms due to the development of architectural environment requires adoption of specified strategy targeted at defined goals falling from the

needs of an individual, a commune and the prevailing (universal) values such as culture and nature.



**Figure 1.** Cultural landscape of Lumnezia Valley. There are three layers which shape the communal feeling of identification with a place: dense development of the village (habitat), fields and pastures (areas of individual and common activities) and untouched natural landscape (spatial dominant). A great number of viewpoints at a different levels makes urban structures in Grisons visible from the 'bird eye's view', which facilitates the assessment of their composition, location of junctions etc. A particular approach to the roof geometry - as the fifth elevation - or to the landscape of roofs is enforced due to particular conditions. (source: author's photograph)

In case of Grisons, exceptional symbiosis of those values forms the cultural landscape (Heyd, 2002, p. 85-88, Lewicka, 2012, p. 37), which is under protection at the regional level as well as at the level of local authorities. The regional level planning is of general nature and is targeted at spatial planning, coordination of activities and promotion of sustainable, policentric development. Planning at the level of local authorities is more detailed and targeted at defined needs of local communities. A zoning plan (Nutzungsplan) - basic planning tool is to determine the manner of use of respective areas, to delimit land plots and areas designated for development and to determine the terms of financing infrastructure of respective services required for such development. What's

important, these plans also account for the requirements of the areas adjacent to the areas designated for the development and pay particular attention to the protection of cultural landscape.

Protected areas or areas particularly susceptible to changes are covered with the so-called *gestaltungsplan* (also: *überbauungsordnung*, *bebauungsplan*), which can be drawn up for a single plot, and which plan in fact is a detailed elaboration of the zoning plan. Because of small scale of the majority of towns and villages in Grisons, it is a particularly useful planning instrument, which allows for a controlled development of a given town with an account for spatial, historical and cultural context. This development is not based on rapid transformation of wasteland or arable land into building plots, but rather on the use of limited resources in the open space.

In other words, urban planning of local self-governments is dominated with the tendency of using architectural **micro-interventions** instead of construction of large complexes of buildings or single, large-size buildings. In the urban scale, the main goal is to preserve historical building and the outline of the development, which is also connected with counteracting excessive sprawl of towns and villages. That's why, a small scale and a private house typology development are preferred<sup>1</sup>.

### **Delicate presence of the tradition**

Urban planning and architectural activities of the communes stem from tradition and pragmatism, they are, however, based on the ingenuity of the architects influenced by the plurality of buildings designed by Rudolf Olgiati, ideas of *invention and memory* propagated by Aldo Rossi and Italian neo-rationalists, in particular by La Tendenza movement. Swiss interpretation of Rossi's ideas, the so-called Ticinese School, and works created under their influence by Aurelio Galfetti and Bruno Reichlin and Fabio Reinhart (in particular, a fantastic Villa

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<sup>1</sup> Despite high quality of space and architecture in Switzerland in general, certain errors have failed to be prevented e.g. erection of two 79 meter tower blocks in Chur (designed by Th. Domenig, 2009-2012). They are a clear dissonance in the landscape of the town and the natural landscape. Moreover, an increasing number of the so-called "second homes" is becoming a bigger and bigger problem (Clivaz, Nahrath, 2010).

Tonini, 1974) have become a significant stimulus for Swiss architects. A rather declarative continuation of local architecture has been transformed into the *patient search* for the right forms by such architects as Peter Zumthor, Valentin Bearth and Andrea Deplaze, Hans Jörg Ruch, Mierta and Kurt Lazzarini and many others.

All these architects use traditional architecture of Grisons with its irregularity and asymmetry of building volumes, strongly integrated with the topography and alpine climate. At the same time, a tendency of reduction of means of expressions as well as reduction of the influence of the new facility upon the existing development (which is under the protection, and so is the landscape, of a zoning plan of a commune, as such protection is its main task) can be observed. At the same time all historical buildings are protected irrespectively of their functions - representative, residential or business ones<sup>2</sup>.

The formulation of entries in the *gestaltungplan* allows for their adaptation to individual needs, and the strategy of communes aimed at limiting new development, in fact, enforces the adaptation of the already existing buildings to new functions. Hans Jörg Ruch converted Clavo – a barn dating back to 1748 by introduction of an *inner shell* in-between the openwork walls. Thus the interior was divided without any interference to the outer structure. The new elements only show themselves in the form of the base plinth and the shoulder plate made of dark concrete linked with an extension constructed at the side of the barn. This *inner shell* can be viewed as an architectural implant (all its parts have been inserted through the roofing opening), whose tar coated surface *gets its daylight from the mystic light already shining through the openings between the timber logs and from one skylight, which brings light through a conical volume into the main floor* (Ruch, cited from: <https://www.ruch-arch.ch/index.php/en/clavo>, access: 05.10.2017).

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<sup>2</sup> Subtle transformations of historical buildings play an important function in the transformation of the cultural landscape. Tschudi's Gallery in Zuoz is nothing but a 13th century residential tower, reconstructed by H.J. Ruch. Its new functions are exposed only via a large glazed window situated just under the roof eaves. Similar transformations of the building functions can be observed in S-hanf (a gallery in Chesa Perini, designed by H.J. Ruch), Vnà (hotel designed by R. Furrer and Ch. Rösch) and Flims (Gelbe Haus designed by V. Olgiati).

Similar strategy of the introduction of a new building block into the already existing structure was applied by Danielle Marques and Bruno Zurkirchen in their conversion of a historic building in Bergün. Yet, in this case, the scale of architectural interventions is clearly visible and so is the contrast between the two forms. A smooth cuboid of light wood introduced into the circumference of the barn perfectly emphasizes the imperfections of the old building: wall cracks, roughness of the stone texture and thick plaster or the cracks and deflections of the rafters.



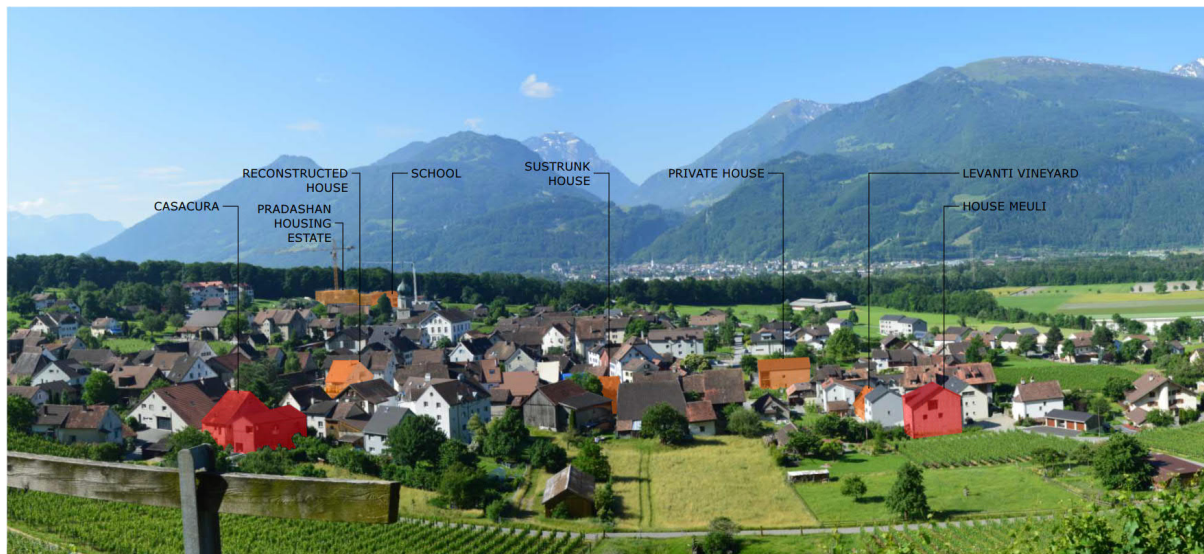
**Figure 2.** Danielle Marques and Bruno Zurkirchen, house in Bergün, 1994-1996. Wooden cuboid, wherein the residential function was inserted into the outline of the walls of the old barn, so that the windows are visible fragments of old walls. (source: author's photograph)

This contrastive, yet very sensual, juxtaposition of modern and traditional forms and functions, materials, textures and colours, renders in effect a unique palimpsest - an architectural record of changes, which despite the difference of the applied forms, continue to preserve the character of the place. In both cases: Clavio and house in Bergün, we are facing an architectural implant: new forms get introduced into the already existing structure in a manner which would

not distort the historical forms, which, however, would preserve the autonomy of the old and new facilities.

The atelier of a poet and a bard, Linard Bardill, designed by Valerio Olgiati, may serve as a good example of the phenomenon of micro-intervention. The form of the building, in accordance with the guidelines of the conservator of the commune of Scharans, was to recreate the outline and the silhouette of the demolished farm building, however, not literally. Instead of characteristic for this region wood, brick-red dyed reinforced concrete was applied. Change of the structure has allowed for only partial accommodation of the interior -meeting the expectations of the dweller. A work studio and a room for relaxation as well as a yard with the view to the neighbouring houses and mountains were included. A house-atelier would also encompass the plot itself, joining the elements of an atrial house with the local building traditions into one cohesive unit. Bardill's atelier has used the scheme of a typical house. One enters the garden through a typical gate, next the interior via the main entrance; this scheme was, however, in this case modified a bit - you enter the garden via the front door and the interior -through a sliding glass wall. Traditional elements were distorted or rearranged. In this case, micro-intervention has gained a multivalent meaning. On the one hand, it has allowed the architects to preserve the historically fixed building outline, integrated into a larger entirety. On the other hand, farming functions have been replaced with cultural ones.

Micro-interventions subtly change the manner of use of public space by introducing into them facilities related to culture and historical memory, which however, are to be subjected to a number of different aspects of life in the commune. Such micro-interventions are part of a wider strategy, mainly targeted for the adaptation of the communes to the transformations of agricultural areas due to mechanisation or change of the profile of agricultural production, which require merger of land areas or extension of the service buildings.



**Figure 3.** The panoramic view of Fläsch: micro-interventions designed by the architects of Atelier-F consisted in the extension and reconstruction of two houses: Casacura and Süsstrunk and the adaptation of farm buildings for vineyard buildings (Adank, Marugg and Levanti vineyards). (Source: the author's photograph and graphical elaboration)

In Fläsch, the commune has decided to go for wine production, as a result many old buildings were reconstructed for the purposes of vineyards and wine houses under the designs of Kurt Hauenstein and Daniel Jäger from Atelier F.

### **Project Vrin**

The commune of a small town of Vrin, has made a decision on gradual transformation into a local tourist centre and a weekend resort, maintaining, however, the previous sector of business activity. Set up in 1979 Pro Vrin foundation, with the funds granted by Gion A. Caminada, has successfully implemented a three stage strategy which comprised modernisation and reconstruction of the existing buildings, designing new buildings in the outskirts of the village and development of the nearby area with facilities dedicated for agricultural production. Caminada, responsible for the planning and designing new facilities, would respect local typology, would use traditional materials and construction technology, in a modern way though. The facilities he designed, namely a multi-purpose hall and the office of the commune of Vrin,

a slaughterhouse with farm buildings, residential houses (including his own) and a funeral chapel, refer to the historical architecture of Vrin, yet they are not based on quotations, but they rather use the power of an archetype shaped by the climate and landscape.

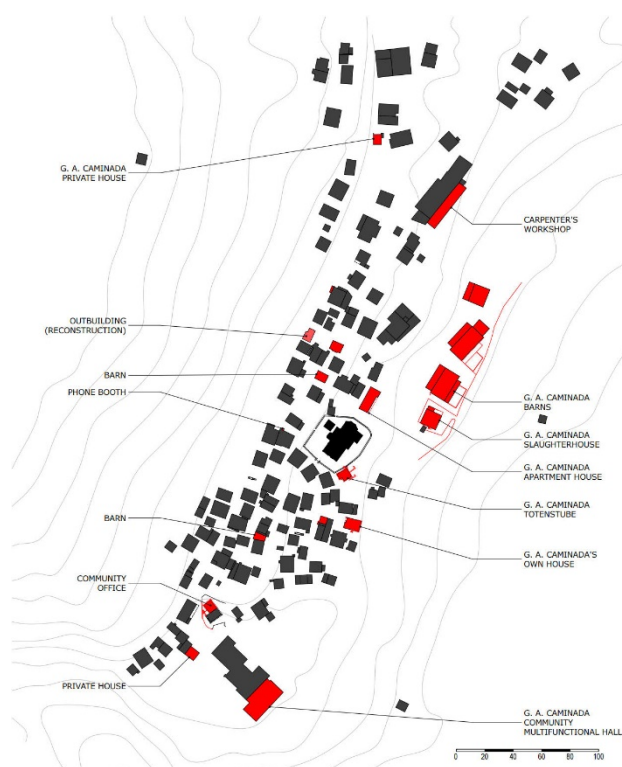
*Totenstube* building is in particular a good example here. Located on the slope, just at the parochial church, this small building belongs to the entire commune, however, on the day of a funeral it is in temporary possession of the family of the deceased<sup>3</sup>. Caminada said:

*The important thing is that the atmosphere of the chapel of the dead should not be oppressive. The idea is to move between the sacred and the profane. [...] The form of the object derives from the place itself. In the interior there should be sufficient space for life. Space for grief, but also space to transcend grief. (Schaub, 2000, p. 140)*

The two storeys: one at the level of the village with separate entrances for the coffin and the mourners and the second at the level of the cemetery at the church correspond to the road from home to church (implying the road from the earth to heaven). This is the reason why Caminada incorporated a typology of a house: a stone roof covered a compact block with slight divisions of the elevation with freely distributed "ordinary" windows. A *struckbau* structure made of larch beams also shows references to the neighbouring houses, with one difference - white colour of *Totenstube* elevation was supposed to underline its distinctiveness as well as to link it with the church building block.

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<sup>3</sup> In the Swiss-German dialect the word *stube* means a living room or a kitchen. That's why, on the upper storey, Caminada designed a bathroom and a kitchen; in small towns of Grisons public buildings serve a number of different functions. (Spier, Tschanz, 2003, p. 60-62).



**Figure 4.** Facilities erected due to the activities of Pro-Vrin foundation supported by G.A. Caminada marked on the plan of Vrin. (source: author's drawing on the basis of [www.map.geo.gr.ch/gr](http://www.map.geo.gr.ch/gr), access: 14.07.2015.)

Together with the neighbouring micro-interventions, *Totenstube* jointly forms the silhouette of Vrin with no distortion of its historical outlook and its relations with the landscape, which are subject to protection equivalent to the protection of the proper relations between old and new development. Subtle differences in the detail shaping or in the use of traditional materials, with simultaneous observance of the same scale, geometry or the roof shape for instance mark the continuation of traditional forms viewed as evolution thereof. The adopted by Swiss architects method of *patient search* for the right spatial and formal solutions has developed under the negotiatory nature of cooperation of the architects and the inhabitants and the perception of a commune as a client/investor, even if the subject of the design is a private facility. Thus, despite changes, any activities in the social and architectural spheres represent continued identification with a place.

## Final conclusion

Development of traditional architectural forms and participation of local communes in their planning and designing facilitates a specific attitude of creators and users. On the one hand, such attitude shows tolerance and openness to new trends, maintaining, on the other hand, distance from them and a critical viewpoint towards them. New solutions get filtered through well-established cultural and climatic factors, which, with their austerity and terrain, are the final verifiers. In other words, architects and users do have this **ability of negating** any *future trends*, exercised in favour of the right choices of those ideas that meet the historical and natural conditions. Confrontation of new trends, tendencies and ideology with strong and deeply felt tradition and environment deemed to be a significant value, verifies the assumptions of these new trends or tendencies, and in consequence adjusts or rejects them respectively. Changes are introduced on the condition that they are well thought of and integrated within the historical and cultural continuum. Architects feel responsible before the commune they cooperate with, and the commune usually makes decisions in view of the best interest of the community and not in view of temporary benefits. Therefore, solutions may be undertaken contrary to the commonly prevailing trends, a decision of the Zermatt commune, banning the use of cars in this area and freezing the sale of building plots to external investors may serve as an example here. As a result of this decision, all the areas around Zermatt belong to the local families of the commune, which in turn is a majority investor in cable cars and ski lifts in the area covering around 350 km of ski pistes. This is an exceptional case in the times of global economy and sales of communal property. This and similar decisions delimit the directions of development and, to some extent, affect its pace. They give the people and place the time to prepare for changes and to adjust the changes. A planning autonomy of the communes gains a particular meaning, and so does the *patient search* for modern forms undertaken by the architects on the basis of the know-how and identification with the local tradition. Its output is the architecture of the aesthetics which can be described as abstract tradition, therefore, aesthetics where the selection of local features is justified with the phenomenology. The

need of transposition of specified meaning gradually fades, suppressed with such architectural forms, which, on the one hand, are to revoke its archetype by way of association and on the other hand, to correspond to modern lifestyle.



**Figure 5.** Anette Gigon and Mike Guyer, house in Luven, 2005-2007. Block of the house has been nicely integrated with a mountain slope and the ridge line adjusted to the mountain slope makes up an extension of the ridge of the neighbouring building. Finishing of the roof and the elevation with copper shingles is as much durable as finishing with traditional larch beams; and like the larch beams, the copper shingles also change in time in a noble manner. (source: photo of the author)

Frequently encountered variety of form, which results from the use of non-traditional technologies, nevertheless nicely blends with the characteristic austerity and simplicity of form and structure typical of Swiss architecture formed in response to the conditions of the place and climate. This involves a significant reduction of details and traditional, architectural elements: cornices, eaves, balustrades etc. Furthermore, the differences between a wall and a roof are levelled off; planes morph creating an abstract composition which more and more often refers to natural forms rather than to forms of regional architecture. Facilities designed by such architects as Mierta and Kurt Lazzarini (Crap La Tgina in Flims) or Anette Gigon and Mike Guyer (house in Luven) have been inspired

with the shapes of rocks or geological formations or directly with the terrain. This trend of local architecture, based on archetypes and nature, successfully manages to sneak away from the traps of architecture being the expression of nostalgia and longing for other times, featuring a relative *sentimentalism* and enigmatic *familiarity*, but no identification with a place, either on the level of an individual or a commune.

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