Vernacular heritage protection by the Superintendence of the Aosta Valley

Cristina De La Pierre[1], Donatella Martinet[2], Barbara Scala[3]
[1]RAVA, Piazza Severino Caveri, 11100 Aosta, Italy, c.delapierre@regione.vda.it; [2] RAVA, Piazza Severino Caveri, 11100 Aosta, Italy, d.martinet@regione.vda.it; [3] DICATAM, Università degli studi di Brescia, Via Branze 43, 25123 Brescia, Italy. barbara.scala@unibs.it

Topic: T4.1. Conservation and restoration projects of vernacular architecture

Abstract

The contribution wants to illustrate the role assumed by the Superintendence of the Aosta Valley to protect the vernacular architecture in the Valley. The particular morphological formation of the territory has been deeply conditioned by the forms, the building techniques, and the materials used.
The first actions of protection promoted by the Superintendence have tried to address the urban planning characterizing the local regulatory plans through rules aimed at safeguarding the building heritage with a classification of buildings in categories. In 1986, the Superintendence then began research into historical rural architecture, recognizing this heritage as an integral part of the landscape and material testimony to the history of the Aosta Valley. Following an experimental phase, which allowed for the fine-tuning of the survey methodology, coordinated action of knowledge was promoted. Using special courses for young people, the surveyors were trained and for over twenty years they carried out a census of rural architecture throughout the region. After collecting and organising the material, exhibitions were held, and publications were prepared to illustrate the construction techniques and the buildings' peculiarities to provide technicians with a better understanding of the architecture and the development of projects more attentive to their characteristics.

Keywords: Planner conservation, guidelines, vernacular architectures

1. Introduction

To present the activity of protection of the Super-intendence of the Aosta Valley, it is necessary to make some preliminary remarks. First of all, the superintendence of the Aosta Valley is a regional one and this allows for greater autonomy from the central Ministry. This makes it possible to give more specific guidelines adapted to the territory, enhancing the specificities of the territory.

A second aspect concerns the close connection between territory and history. In fact, the mor-phological conformation has favoured the birth of a cultural enclave strongly characterized by unique artistic expressions.

Finally, it is important to note that the Valley is sparsely populated by residents. There are only 127,000 inhabitants in 3,263 km².
This area is protected thanks to the work of 43 officials divided into the Landscape and Archi-tectural Heritage offices (18); Architectural Her-itage (9); Archaeological Heritage (2); Publica-tions (2) Exhibitions (9) Scientific Analysis Laboratory (3).

2. Aosta Valley region

Aosta Valley is an alpine region located in the North-West of Italy. It is crossed by a central river (Dora Baltea) fed by side streams that run through the side valleys. Valleys are linked with mountain passes that lead to Piedmont (Eastward and South-ward), Switzerland (Northward), and France

(Westward). For a very long time, mountains were not barriers. They have contributed to cultural exchanges and trade.

Another prominent indicator is language. Until the first part of the 20th century, the Aosta Valley had been a primarily French-speaking region. There is also a German-speaking ethnic minority known as Walser. In the 12th century, part of such population migrated from the Swiss district of Goms to the northern part of the Gressoney Valley. Institutional relationships with France and Switzerland have been relevant as well. For example, the jurisdiction of the Saint-Maurice d'Agaune abbey (Va-lais, Switzerland) included the northern parts of the Ayas and Gressoney valleys. The latter was shared with the jurisdiction of the Sion (Switzerland) Bishopric. From 1416 to 1563, the capital city of Aosta Valley was Chambéry (France), under the jurisdiction of the Savoia Dukes. Seasonal migrations of the inhabitants (especially masons, chimney sweeps, and other workers) contributed to cultural diversity, that influenced local rural architecture.

Other important aspects that have influenced rural architecture and agriculture are the mountain heights, exposition, acclivity, irrigation, and soil type. For example, the large flat area below the *Bard* grapes is cultivated on slopes exposed to the sunlight. Vineyards are stuck onto terracings. Grapes also climb pergolas. The scenery is characterized by a series of dry stone walls and green pillows. Viticulture is present throughout the orographic left of the central valley. It encompasses an altitude of 1000 m a.s.l. On the opposite side, agriculture is sporadically present.

A strip of forest (prevalently constituted by conifers) is beyond high-altitude permanent settlements. Alpine pastures are located further upward. They host livestock during the summer (for around 100 days a year). The first territorial organization followed the directives of the Romans, but the medieval period was also very significant. Feudatories incentivized the colonization and reclamation of new soils through tax reductions or cancellations. Reclamations involved the construction of further infrastructures: paths, mule paths, irrigation canals, and terracing.

Along pathways, new villages were built and the weft of the landscape was enriched by irrigation channels. *Transhumance*, or the movement of animals at high altitudes, led to the formation of mountain pastures along the ridges of the mountains Saint-Jean typically, the stops to climb at high altitudes were four). Naturally, not secondary is the climate that has not always been the same. A hotter climate allowed for broader land exploitation, e.g. during the Roman period and the 15th century. The cold period implied regressions, e.g. toward the end of the 16th century. Environmental, cultural and economic dynamics yielded diversified kinds of settlements. Villages were built in the shape of a comb and developed along the Roman road of Gaul. Large colonies have appeared in regions where cereal cultivation was well developed. German-speaking populations lived in small centres scattered around the territory. Sporadic housing units around vineyards were small as well. All such kinds of settlements were linked to their relative countryside.

Black death, from 1347 to 1350, implied a dramatic contraction. According to historians, it killed more than half of the population. At the end of the disease, society was restructured. Lands left without owners got redistributed among survivors. As a consequence, entrepreneurship became stronger than before 1347. Ownership of previously shared parcels had become privately owned. (De Tillier J. B 1968).

A second worsening occurred because of the 1630 epidemic. Woods and pastures got expanded whereas cultivation shrank.

In the second half of the 19th century, large permanent migration started. They led to the depopulation of mountains and the final decline of traditional agriculture.

Urbanization of the large centres of the central valley was fostered by the increase of trade (favoured by the arrival of a railroad in Aosta in 1886) and later, by industrialization.

Tourism took off in the 18th century with the Grand Tour (Maggi 2008). The interest in mountains started after Mont Blanc was climbed for the first time in 1786. Thermal baths became popular around that time. After that, the sport of skiing became very important: the discipline emerged as a success in the 1930s.

Ski lifts were built in Breuil-Cervinia (1936) and Courmayeur (1939). After the Second World War and especially at the end of the 1950s, mass tourism took off. In addition to historical villas and hotels, new resorts opened. Tourists bought holiday homes.

Several new buildings were entering the landscape: ski lifts, ski runs, industrial agglomerations and hydropower plants. There has been a significant building expansion. In addition, the rivers have been converted for other activities.

Collective memory preserved the original utilization of soils in toponyms, collected by the *BREL* (Bureau Régional pour Technologie et la Linguistique)., meadows (*prou, pra, mattu, …*), fields (*tsan, champ,*), tillage lands (*ronc, ronchail, …*), cultivated fields (*noveilloz, röiti,*), woods (*bioley, verney, érllji, …*), alpine pastures (*la montagne de, jatz…*) and so on. Cultural inheritance is rich and well documented in numerous archives[1]. In the context of regional cultural studies, everyone contributes within his or her field of interest, through (historical) enquiries, events, meetings, publications, and fieldwork. In addition to that, ethnographic museums (of Allein, Champorcher, Cogne, Donnas, Fontainemore, Gressan, Gressoney-La-Trinité, Introd, Torgnon, Valsavarenche and Valtournenche) represent slices of peasant life (A.A.V.V., 1984).

3. Protecting rural heritage: a specimen path of traditions guardianship[2]

The historical heritage census of vernacular architecture began in 1983. The architect Claudine Remacle[3] started it with the coordination of the architect Flaminia Montanari[4], director of the Superintendence. Since 1987, courses for detectors of rural architectural heritage have been promoted. The enrolled personnel was constituted of technical school graduates and architecture students. Fluent French was considered a must for candidates. Participants were selected through an admission exam constituted by a drawing test outdoor and an interview. Chosen candidates went through a course on history, landscape kinds (structural and constructive), understanding of historical documents and drawing techniques. The utilized references were textbooks and material provided by the lecturers. At the end of the course, candidates had to edit a dissertation on a building they chose. The study was evaluated by a commission, made up of the lecturers of the course. If the research was considered to be up to standards, the student was allowed to begin fieldwork. Later on, he or she was required to pass another exam. If successful, the candidate received the professional qualification of surveyor of rural architectural heritage. Among other things, it allowed Region[5] to engage the candidate in building studies (Remacle 1986, Remacle 2001).

Knowledge was needed to contrast bad building recovery. Such practice considers buildings as a volume right for secondary accommodations. Instead, rural architecture should be considered a historical and cultural heritage. Classification incentivized studies on historical transformations of buildings and

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[1] The Académie Saint-Anselme, the Istituto storico della Resistenza in Valle d'Aosta, the Comité des Traditions Valdôtaines, the Société Valdôtaine de Préhistoire et d'Archéologie, the Association Augusta, the Association Valdôtaine des Ar-chives Sonores (A.V.A.S.), the Centre Culturel Walser, Lo Charaban, the Union internationale de la presse francophone – Section de la Vallée d'Aoste, the Centre d'Etudes Les Anciens Remède, the Association Centre d'études Abbé Trèves, the Société de La Flore Valdôtaine, the Federachon Valdôtena di Teatro Populero, the Centre d'Etudes Francoprovençales "René Willien", the Museo dell'artigianato

valdostano di tradizione (MAV) and the millennial fair of Sant'Orso.

[2] https://www.regione.vda.it/cultura/patrimonio/architettura_rurale/default_i.asp

[3] http://www.remacle.it/it/

[4] https://www.regione.vda.it/gestione/riviweb/templates/aspx/environnement.aspx?pkArt=984

[5] Legge regionale 1° luglio 1991, n. 21 - Tutela e censimento del patrimonio storico di architettura minore in Valle d'Aosta; course and participants were funded by the European Union

the landscape. Thanks to the availability of new and instructed personnel, data were collected from the countryside and historical archives. Anagraphical and descriptive data, as well as drawings and pictures, were archived on a dedicated form (1) to take a census about vernacular historical heritage (Soardo 2010).

Forms were identified through progressive numbers, cadastral references of the properties (for every village of which a census was taken) and the storage number of the picture. The form is divided into sections. The first one deals with an entire block. The oldest building is identified first, followed by the more recent ones (2).

Conventional symbols are used to represent the chronological order (3). The second section represents the roofs of the entire block.

Other sections graphically report the floors of the building with their current use, the entries, the staircases, the balconies, the noticeable elements (fireplaces, sink, built-in wardrobes,…) and the main façade (4).

After reading the block, the form lists prospectus drawings reporting openings (lintel, bows, upright…) every written material, symbol and date found upon the structure, their location; chimneys; noticeable elements (balustrades, locks,…).

Fig.1 The form (Fontainemore).

Fig.2. Block (Fénis).

Fig. 3. Planimetric breakdown in Gressoney-Saint-Jean and planimetric breakdown Arvier.

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Fig. 4 The main façade in Ayas and in Saint-Vincent.

Buildings host several signs with an allegorical meaning: the most ancient ones report feudal (Savoia shield and knot) (5) and religious (greek, Saint-Maurice and patents cross and the monogram of Christ - IHS) symbols.

Fig. 5 Savoia knot (Gressoney-Saint-Jean – particular-) and Savoia shield and symbols (Gignod).

Datings are in Arabic numbers. The oldest ones date back to the 16th century (6), and the most numerous ones start from the 18th century. The owner initials are generally on the ridge after accompanied by a dating, sometimes followed by the acronym FF (fait faire) (7). Rarely, do the initials of the builder follow.
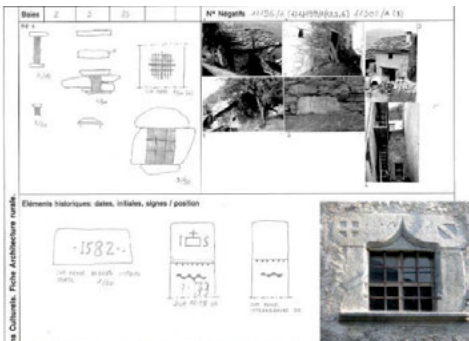

Fig. 6 16th century (Fontainemore) and 16th century (Chambave).

Another section is dedicated to the horizontal structure typologies (usually vaults and floors).

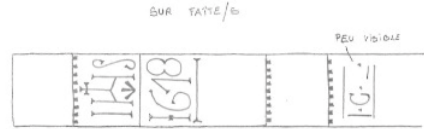Eléments historiques: dates, initiales, signes / position

Fig. 7. Ridge in Allein ridge draw in Arvier.

A further section concerns the exterior walls. They are classified according to material, mortar, finishes and construction typology. There is a catalogue listing the recurrent varieties of stone masonries (based on typology, dimension and lying of corners of the connections of the masonries amount them). The combination of writings and signs found, as well as the kind of masonries leads to realistic hypotheses concerning the ages of the construction phases of the building at the century level.

Summarizing maps of every historical centre have been drawn (based upon the land register). They concern some constructive elements of the building: the construction and evolution of blocks (the oldest and newest buildings), their use (rural, civil, mixed,…) and their presumed age.

Forms report the historical and architectural quality of the property. Maps display the overall evolution of historical villages. Their combination shed light on alterations of functional typologies over time. They can be digitalized by assigning a code to each element (e.g. monolith-ic stone lintel, wooden arched…) to allow for quick and focused queries.

As expected, the fieldwork was often accompanied by archival research, in particular on the transcription of the main data of the cadastre Sardo and the Origin Stato. The Sardo land register (1770) concerns the entire region and it is divided by parishes. It contains only descriptive information: toponyms and parcels,

their owners, their neighbours, the quality and quantity of properties and assessed valuation. It is of historical interest because it represents the situation at the end of the feudal system.

The cadastre land register was written between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. It includes adequate cartography sheets with parcel numbers. The latter is particularly relevant in depicting the phase of the largest expansion of agriculture and, thus, of rural inhabited areas. Furthermore, it allows to map the quality of parcels, know which families were owning which buildings and lands and verify the economic structure (who cultivates what and where). Entries can be compared with the ones of the 18th century.

Map highlighting macro crops around villages was edited as well. They shot the structural woof of the landscape (paths, mule paths, terracing, a heap of stones removed from fields,…). To favour the understanding of villages, a census has been taken of the surrounding areas, and the dossier ends with a questionnaire. It asks for a description of historical (divided by pavings, support structures, fences) and recent roads (penetration roads and parking areas). Other questions concern the list of community buildings (chapel, school, oven, mill,…), crops (presence of ancient ones, of terracings and of which kind), and irrigation (traditional canals of modern sprinkler irrigation).

The questionnaire also asks whether the sight of old buildings is obstructed by new ones, to understand the level of urban development; condition repair, state of ruin or renewal (and the quality of restorations). The last questions concern the selection of the most relevant buildings and the reasons for the choice.

4. From knowledge to a project

Research results are used to design a more cautious urban building planning. 87% of the regional territory is protected by national and regional laws. The landscape and cultural heritage are protected by the Decreto Legislativo 22 Gennaio 2004, n. 42 "Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio", parte terza, by the Piano territoriale paesistico della Valle d'Aosta[6] and by the Legge regionale 10.06.1983, n. 56. Cultural heritage includes monuments and archaeological areas.

For the sake of environmental protection, road advertising is regulated since the 31st of May 1956. Activities that might modify building styles and the landscape need to be approved by the Superintendence by the effect of other regional laws (e.g. solar or photovoltaic panels installation, coating of relevant buildings).

Protected areas and building classifications in historical areas are listed on the geoportal SCT (Sistema delle conoscenze territoriali)[7]. The culture of environmental protection is diffused through meetings. Invited individuals include officials and managers of the Superintendence, proposing subjects (local administrators, owners, planners or farmers' association presidents).

Fig. 8. Sketch of the raccard (Ayas) and example Raccard (Fontainemore).

Only architects can deal with monuments (articles 2 e 10). They evaluate both their internal and external parts. Structures under landscape preservation are

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checked just externally (art 146). *Raccards* are frequent cases (8). They are wooden structures for hay and cereals. They are sustained by a lower part made up of stones; on which truncated pyramidal wooden supports rest surmounted by a round stone slab (defined as *mushrooms* for their appearance); the upper structure in trunks, preferably of larch, weighs on them. Keeping the two parts separate is fundamental, avoiding closures between the *mushrooms*.
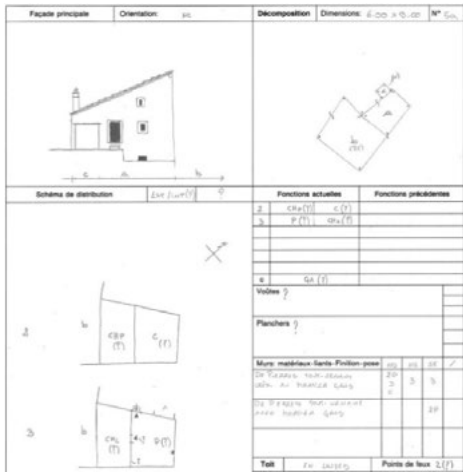

Fig. 9. Sketch of the plaster survey (Arvier) and example of plaster (Allein).

Scratching a plaster to point out the stone below is a common request. Plaster (9) is an element of good quality and richness of the house, whereas the masonry beneath was not constructed accurately enough to be shown. Explaining that to homeowners is hard.

Projects need to meet requirements to be checked by civil workers: chorography, relief status and adequate scale project, for the relevance of the building, exhaustive description and pictures. If the planner falls short of presenting adequate documentation, integrations may be required (10). The Region keeps funds to intervene in real properties thanks to regional laws. Some uses of such funds are listed: the recovery of the historical-architectural heritage of the village of Bard[8], the restoration and conservation of the artistic, historical and environmental building heritage[9], the enhancement of historical itineraries, famous sites and places of history and literature[10] and the support for the protection, conservation and enhancement of the villages in the Aosta Valley[11]. To these, we can add the subsidized rate loans with the provisions on housing policies[12] and the economic benefits for the obligation to build the roof covered in stone slate[13] (Remacle 2014).
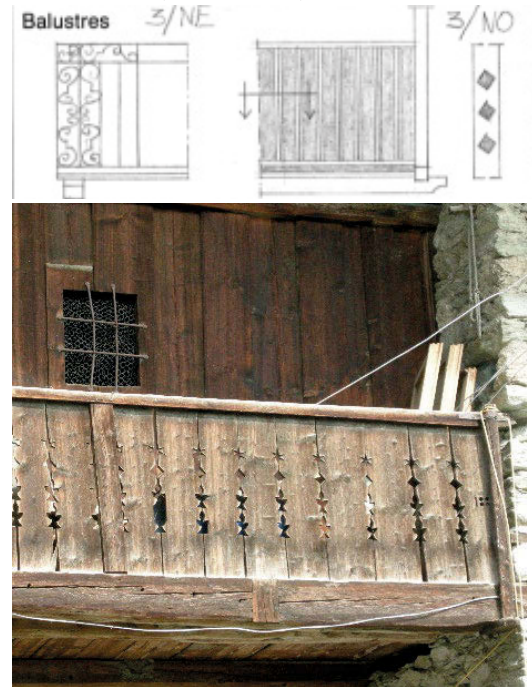

Fig. 10. Balustrades in Gressoney-Saint-Jean and Doues.

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[8] l.r. N. 68 del 1992

[9] l.r. N. 27 del 1993

[10] l.r. N. 18 del 2002

[11] l.r. N. 30 del 2005

[12] l.r. N. 3 del 2013, deriving from a precedent of 1973

[13] l.r. N. 13 del 2007, deriving from a precedent of 1986

5. Conclusion

The vernacular architecture heritage of the Aosta Valley is huge, especially in the less touristy villages where recent transformations had less impact. (Martinet 2011). The Superintendence of the Aosta Valley[14] to protect the vernacular architecture through differentiating actions.

Firstly through knowledge of the heritage, with a cataloguing campaign of buildings and villages and landscape studies.

Secondary through exhibitions, publications and the possibility to consult the research carried out. Very important are the meetings with the designers to indicate the right approach to the restoration of buildings and the formation of city plans. (Mileto 2015).

Then there is the purely institutional role. The Superintendence carries out the protection, conservation, enhancement and use of the cultural heritage, providing for the release of authorizations and opinions by the law (86% of the regional territory is subject to landscape or monumental restrictions - the practices learned are about 4,000 per year).

Rural buildings are protected by state and regional laws. The intervention projects on them must be subject to specific provisions. About their classification (monumental, documentary or valuable buildings) they must obtain the authorization of the Superintendence. In any case, those built before 1945 cannot be pulled down.

Over the years, thanks to the awareness of the importance of the vernacular historical heritage (aided by the need to know to design), the interest in building filing has increased and so have the requests for their consultation.

The rules inserted by the Superintendence in the municipal urban plans during the process of approval of the same contribute to the modalities of intervention on historic buildings: 72 out of 74 municipalities of the Aosta Valley have their urban planning tool appropriate to recent regional laws.

They have included additional devices relating to the areas of the relevance of the buildings, the historical paths, and the elements characterizing the landscape (terracings, ditches, high pastures, woods, streams, lakes, falls, monumental trees, ...) and, obviously, the structure of the villages themselves.

We must never forget that we did not inherit our lands from our fathers but from our children.

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[14]   https://www.regione.vda.it/amministrazione/struttura/info-mappa_i.asp?codmap=75

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