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Abstract English

Alpine Common Ground investigates how architecture can strengthen collective life in alpine villages through the creation of human-centred public infrastructure. The thesis focuses on Olivone, a village in the Blenio Valley, Canton Ticino, a territory that has experienced economic and demographic decline following the progressive concentration of services, investments and opportunities in urban centres. Despite these challenges, Olivone hosts a surprising concentration of productive, educational and cultural activities. Farming, local production, tourism, the Alpine Foundation for Life Sciences (FASV), the Scuola Alpina and emerging research initiatives all contribute to the vitality of the whole valley. Yet these realities often operate within separate spheres, with limited opportunities for interaction, collaboration and mutual support. The research therefore asks whether the future of alpine villages depends less on introducing new programmes and more on creating spatial conditions that allow existing actors to connect and define their future together. The project combines spatial analysis with ethnographic methods, including direct observation and interviews with local producers, institutions, educators and municipal representatives. Drawing on Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory, the relationships between people, activities and places are mapped in order to reveal existing synergies and identify opportunities for new forms of cooperation. These networks are analysed across seasonal and daily cycles, highlighting how productive, educational and touristic activities overlap throughout the year. The thesis argues that public space should be understood not only as open space between buildings but as a social infrastructure capable of fostering encounters, knowledge exchange and collective identity. The architectural proposal develops as a sequence of interconnected public spaces and shared facilities that link the future research campus, local producers, education and tourism activities. Through the transformation of existing parking areas, the reuse of a vacant buildings, the introduction of temporary accommodation, workshops, laboratories, a communal canteen and adaptable gathering spaces, the project creates opportunities for simultaneity and shared use. The project builds upon existing local initiatives, resources and traditions; new buildings are carefully positioned within the existing village fabric while the redesign of streets and squares prioritises pedestrians, social interaction and everyday life over vehicular movement. Stone, gravel and vegetation replace extensive asphalt surfaces, establishing a coherent public realm that reconnects the fragmented activities of the village. The thesis ultimately proposes a model of alpine regeneration based on proximity, cooperation and shared space. By creating a human-scaled network of public infrastructure, the project aims to strengthen the relationships between inhabitants, researchers, visitors and local producers, supporting a resilient future for Olivone while reinforcing its distinctive alpine identity.

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Alpine Common Ground

Human-centred public infrastructure for the
regeneration of Olivone, Blenio

Hochschule Luzern















Alpine Common Ground

*Human-centred public infrastructure for
the regeneration of Olivone, Blenio*

Thesis Book

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By Laura Roncelli

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Alpine Common Ground

*The importance of human-centred public
infrastructure for the regeneration of Olivone,
Blenio Valley*

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Abstract

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future research campus, local producers, education and tourism activities. Through the transformation of existing parking areas, the reuse of a vacant buildings, the introduction of temporary accommodation, workshops, laboratories, a communal canteen and adaptable gathering spaces, the project creates opportunities for simultaneity and shared use.

The project builds upon existing local initiatives, resources and traditions; new buildings are carefully positioned within the existing village fabric while the redesign of streets and squares prioritises pedestrians, social interaction and everyday life over vehicular movement. Stone, gravel and vegetation replace extensive asphalt surfaces, establishing a coherent public realm that reconnects the fragmented activities of the village.

The thesis ultimately proposes a model of alpine regeneration based on proximity, cooperation and shared space. By creating a human-scaled network of public infrastructure, the project aims to strengthen the relationships between inhabitants, researchers, visitors and local producers, supporting a resilient future for Olivone while reinforcing its distinctive alpine identity.

“Village life [...] is linked to feelings of community, manageability and tradition. It’s not merely a quaint and nostalgic rural idyll, but holds great potential for integration and identification for many. ... In a village one can feel a sense of belonging to a community.”¹

¹ Maarit Ströbele, ‘Der Dorfplatz Für Das 21. Jahehundert’. (own translation)

Introduction

Olivone in Blenio valley is an alpine village with some aspects of rural idyll and tradition, yet its sense of community is under threat. Overall the economic development of the last century created a more individualistic society, while in the valley the weakening of the togetherness was worsened by rates of depopulation and economic struggle.

The research branches from a personal engagement in Blenio valley. With the participation in a summer school project and the realization that insufficient attention given to the issues that remote valleys in the Alps are facing. Whether their isolation, decreasing population or lack of infrastructure and economic competitiveness.

Within the urban and architectural academic context, the research and the discourse focuses on understanding the cities and their future. From their urban organization to the quality of public space. Yet even in cities, people seek for a sense of belonging and community, which traditionally was found in villages. Therefore, the decision of conducting a thesis to explore how Olivone holds the potential for achieving and developing such feelings once again.

During my time in Olivone, it became evident that the challenge the village is facing is not solely economic nor demographic, but also spatial and social. The village became a space of transit, lacking spaces for encounter and the local actors operate as isolated entities.

Therefore new opportunities are envisioned for Olivone, rather than a conservative nostalgia of a farming countryside frozen in time, the project aims to bring the villagers and their activities out in the public and social space, so new networking can be established. The intention is not to recreate an idealised past, but to understand which qualities once enabled communal life and how they may be translated into contemporary forms working and sharing space.

Ultimately, the project develops from the idea that architecture can support social proximity. Through shared and adaptable spaces and the requalification of the street as a social environment. The proposal aims to strengthen connections between inhabitants, visitors, researchers and local producers. Public space is understood not only as a physical condition, but as a framework to strengthen local autonomy while opening for collaboration and exchange on collective futures.

Methodology

The concrete design question arose in the preparatory period, before the thesis semester. In that time frame, historical research was conducted, and relevant information was gathered. The document “Fresh Perspectives for Blenio Valley” is the foundation and source for the current work; therefore, its content is only partially reintroduced here.

Concerning the following chapters, they are a supporting tool for the architectural thesis project. This book is divided in two parts, part one is a collection of the research and background information relevant for the design process.

The first chapter contains a general overview of the municipality of Blenio, its historical development and the current challenges and opportunities.

The Actor-Network Theory from Bruno Latour is used to investigate beyond the general understanding of a place. Ethnographic methodology is applied through interviews and observational practice, expanding the possible understanding of the village reality. This process is explained in the second chapter.

The third chapter collects reflections and references on the public space of remote or alpine municipalities. Moreover, architectural vocabulary and projects help to look critically at the current situation and inspire new possibilities.

Currently, there is a lack of theoretical research about the specificity of villages’ public spaces. Therefore, relevant case studies are analysed, and where possible, city dynamics are translated to the village reality.

Part two of the book presents the results of the project as a conclusion of the semester work. Architectural interventions are explained and visualized further.

Research question and hypothesis

The role of public space in cities has been widely discussed, yet what can public space be outside active urban centres.

Could a redevelopment of the communal, public, shared space help to counteract the challenges that alpine villages are facing?

The research supports the thesis that in a declining alpine village, public space is not an ornament or a secondary element of urban planning. Public space is often the leftover space between fenced private grounds and this produces highly dysfunctional spaces, that reflects into debilitated public life.

The project wants to prove that a communal infrastructure is a necessity to reconnect social, productive, educational and touristic life in Blenio. Finally, this approach could hold an opportunity to reverse the decline known to affect alpine realities; as this is happening in few alpine villages already.

Part One Research

1. Blenio Explained

Historical Development of Blenio

Blenio Survival

2. Ethnographic Research

Personal Observation

Local Interviews

Activities, Actors and Synergies

3. Spatial Problem or Social Problem

Social Potential

Architectural Potential



Fig.9 Hotel Acquarossa, Terme

Fig.9 Historical photo showing the hotel serving the thermal facilities in Acquarossa, dating probably 1930. Today the buildings sit empty.

1.

Blenio explained

Olivone is the administrative hamlet in the Blenio municipality, located at the end of Blenio valley in Canton Ticino, Switzerland. Once its own municipality, since 2006 it has been merged with five others to optimise the public organisation. The municipality counts 1700 inhabitants, a number in slow but steady decline since 1990.²

Today, its economy relies mostly on farming production – milk and cheese – and only partially on tourism activities, which is surprising given its natural landscape beauty.

But this situation wasn't always the reality; the valley had a flourishing past that stretched back to Roman times.

“The charming image of a rural and rustic valley has somehow developed after periods of industrialisation, when the village lost their competitiveness to the more productive cities and factories closed, leaving the village “stuck” in time”³

1.1 Historical development of Blenio

Since Roman times, Blenio valley has been one of the main crossing points in the Alps with the Lucomagno pass, as it has a gentle morphology. Therefore, it represented the link between north and south of Europe, used mostly for commercial and pilgrimage routes. In Mediaeval times, it was first controlled by the ruling family of Milan, until 1500 when the Swiss Confederation took over the control of the alpine crossings.⁴

The village of Olivone was the last stopping point before the strenuous climb; therefore, the presence of services for the travellers – hospices and restaurants – was an important part of the valley's economy.

Besides the strategic position along commercial routes, Blenio is a

² USTAT, 'Dati Ticino e Svizzera'.

³ Roncelli Laura, 'Fresh Perspectives for Blenio Valley'.

⁴ Dizionario Storico della Svizzera, 'Blenio Distretto'.

wide and sunny valley, which favoured the agricultural development. The livelihood in the valley was simple and based on a subsistence economy until the 1850s, relying on forestry and agriculture, seasonal emigration to urban centres, and forms of local self-government.

With the industrialisation, Blenio valley developed further too; in 1911 the train line Biasca-Acquarossa was opened and kept in operation until 1973.⁵

The fast access to the valley served and allowed the industrial and touristic development, typical of the beginning of the 20th century. The opening of the chocolate factory Cima-Norma in 1903 and the thermal centre of Acquarossa in 1932 fostered population and economic growth.

These three realities showcase the most flourishing moment for Blenio valley until today: urban structures with fast train connection, industries giving jobs and services to a large part of the population and tourism coming to enjoy the untouched nature that the valley offers in great quantities.

It is with the motorisation of society that Blenio valley had to confront recession. With agricultural machines, fewer people were necessary to run farms, the daughters and sons left to study in the cities, and just few came back.

Surely the number of tourists increased, but crossing the alps became an easy day trip with private motorised mobility (cars, motorbikes and buses). An overnight stop in Blenio was not a necessity anymore. The hotels started offering only restaurant services, owning a car was more attractive than using the train service, and the young generations kept moving to cities.⁶

In 1968, the main employer of the valley – the chocolate factory Cima-norma – closed its production, followed in 1972 by the Thermal facilities in Acquarossa, and the following year the train service was replaced by buses.

5 'Ferrovia Biasca/Acquarossa'.

6 Roncelli Laura, 'Fresh Perspectives for Blenio Valley'.



Fig.10 Lumberjacks



Fig.13 First train ride 07/1911



Fig.11 Seasonal chimney sweepers in the city, man



Fig.14 Cima Norma Chocolate Factory



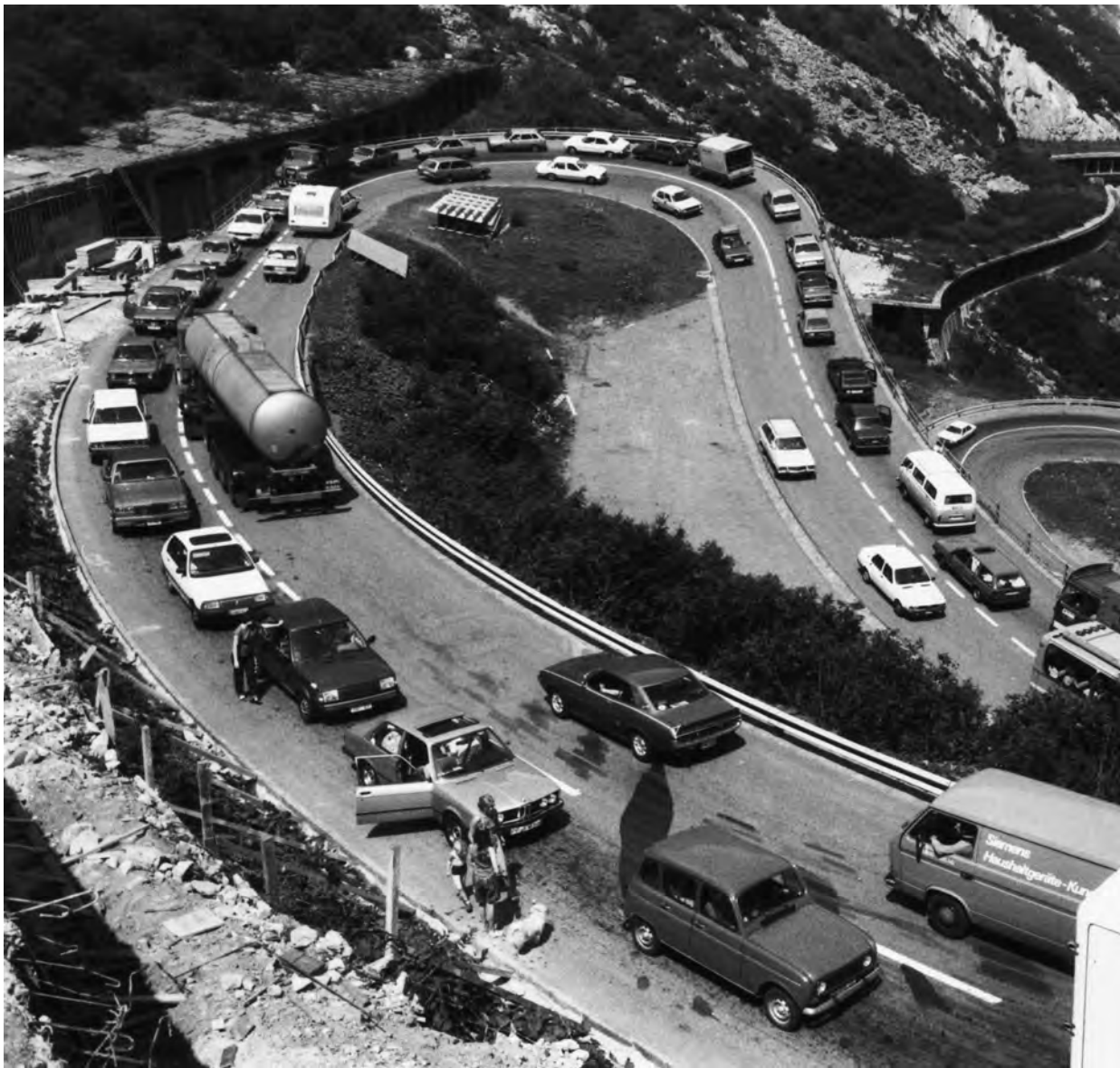
Fig.12 Women and children making hay



Fig.15 Bus ride over the Lucomagno pass

Fig.10 – Historical photos of Blenio valley.

Fig.13 A comparison between the second half of 1800, still characterised by agricultural economy; and the development of the 1900 with the Cima Norma Chocolate industry, the Biasca-Acquarossa train and later the bus service.





1.2 *Blenio survival*

Currently, the economy of Blenio is surviving with the presence of local farmers, a few producers and local crafts. The shift of the economy towards tourism appeared like a missed chance for the region. The cantons of Graubünden and Valais demonstrated how sustainable tourism can reduce the economic pressure of agricultural realities, which can not compete with the urban centres but are as essential for the Confederation.⁷

Besides the local production, there is an educational reality well integrated into the fabric of the valley. The Fondazione Alpina Scienze della Vita – FASV (Alpine Foundation for Life Sciences – AFLS) has been active in the territory since 1990.

The foundation started as an alpine herbalist non-profit association with a strong interest towards education and research. Since then, they specialised in a toxicology laboratory and the Scuola Alpina. Through the school, they organise workshops and educational events with nature in the Alps as a central topic. While the toxicology exams support the foundation financially, decentralise services from the cities and diversify the economy of the municipality.

Moreover, Blenio has many sport facilities for adults and younger generations, which propose activities all year round.

During winter the Nordic centre in Campra and skiing facilities in Campo Blenio. In spring and summer, the TCS camping opens a swimming pool for tourists and inhabitants.

Then the Gioventù & Sport Centre organises sport camps for children and rents space for sport association. Finally, the Polisport is a recently renovated structure with indoor and outdoor climbing walls, outdoor tennis pitch.

Another active actor for the valley is the Ente Regionale per lo Sviluppo – Bellinzonese e Valli (ERV-BV). It is a private partnership of local actors (municipalities and associations) which acts as a publicly interested body coordinating development strategies and territorial initiatives. Among the initiatives they supported, the Blenio Masterplan is of high importance, as it stands in response to the cantonal directives for development. Established in 2017 and

⁷ Roncelli Laura, 'Fresh Perspectives for Blenio Valley'.

tailored to local conditions and priorities with a vision for 2035.⁸ The main areas of influence are defined in three categories: living, working and tourism. For example, through the creation of new job opportunities, the strengthening of local enterprises, the attraction of new inhabitants through diversified housing models, and favouring small-scale tourism and education. In this sense, the masterplan aims to establish the conditions for a stable, year-round economy, where landscape care, work and living are closely interconnected.

After all, the missed chance with tourism in the late 1900s reveals an important positive side: mass tourism left untouched and “original” Blenio. Now it is essential for the valley to search for a sustainable and complete way to redevelop the local economy. To achieve this, both the municipalities, the ERS-BV and the private actors are closely cooperating.

An inspiring example comes from the collaboration between the ERS-BV, the FASV and some private owners. They are mediating with the Municipality for the opening of an historical villa – the Centralone – from the 1700s into an educational campus of regional importance. This new proposal presents good opportunities as it extends what Olivone can offer, while the local realities would also benefit from it. The success of tourism closely depends on weather conditions, while education doesn't. This diversification is a good chance to ensure an all year round stable economy for the village.

8 ERSBV, 'Masterplan Dei Comuni Della Valle Di Blenio'.



Fig.18 Centralone, Villa from 1700, it is at the centre of the project for an educational campus. FASV, SUPSI and private owners are actively cooperating with the municipality and the ERS-BV to make this reality.



Fig.19 Areal view of the villa surrounded by a dense garden, and located between the municipality, the schools and the church. The campus it is planned to be openly accessible, extending the network of public spaces in Blenio.



Fig.20 Farm in Campo (Blenio)



Fig.21 Spaces of the Scuola Alpina in Olivone



Fig.22 Cross-county skiing facilities in Campra, opened in 2019



Fig.23 TCS camping in Olivone, opened in 2024

Fig.20– To ensure a stable future the Blenio Masterplan has various focus points. From services to the inhabitants, valorization of local farms and crafts, support of education on alpine science and culture and a year round offer for conscious tourism

2. Ethnographic research

Ethnography is a method known in both applied and academic disciplines. It is mostly used in social anthropology and cultural sociology, as the ancient Greek origin defines ethnography as the “description of foreign folks”.⁹

It deals with understanding people and the dynamics of behaving as a social group external to the ethnographer.

Therefore, the practice suggests a degree of unknown between the researcher and the people or social dynamics that are investigated. This condition resonates with the research practice that precedes any design process. Before designing a building or an object that has the potential to change existing situations, these must be known and understood beforehand.¹⁰

Architects and designers use ethnographic methods in a chaotic and sometimes unconscious way; this does not compromise the results, as ethnography does not strive for objectivity. The researcher can adapt various methods, which do not require to be applied dogmatically, but more organically tailored to the case. The book *Design Ethnography* by Müller (2021) lists the most common methods applied in design ethnography research, such as observation, interviews and conversations, field notes; but also sketches, photography and participatory production. The book explains the application of the method, allowing one to apply it consciously and to benefit from it.

For the research in Blenio, observation and informal interviews are selected and explained further.

2.1 *Personal Observation*

Observation in Blenio started from the moment the valley is approached. Slowly entering a different environment from the city and the highway the lead to Olivone.

Controlled observation is carried out as soon as one steps out of the car in Piazza d’Armi. Looking for clues, people and their activities. A transcript of the first experience is presented as follows.

A sunny, quiet village immersed in a mountain valley. The parking is spacious and filled with vehicles. A car arrives next to mine, with an

9 Francis Müller, *Design Ethnography*.

10 Francis Müller, *Design Ethnography*.

elderly couple on board. I wait in the car to observe the interactions. The man steps out first and helps – whom I believe is – the wife to step out. They enter the grocery store, a Denner Partner. I step out of the car and walk into the asphalted square where cars cover the view to the ground floors of the buildings defining the space. There seems to be a mix of shops on the ground floor and housing on the first floors. But the chattering of people arrives from a raised terrace, the sign reads: Bar Rex. From this café, people have already noticed me as foreign, external. Other two cars arrive and park in an unorderedly manner. These visitors get into the café and the Denner very quickly. I decide to approach the supermarket. The cashier is smoking outside the entrance, smiles and calls the customer at the checkout by name, saying that she will attend to him soon.

Fig.24 View of Piazza d'Armi, the central parking place of Olivone



The major limitation of observing known or familiar places is that conclusions are reached too rapidly and blind spots remain, hindering the opportunity for new interpretations.¹¹

This was personally the case as life in alpine valleys was part of my childhood years; therefore, the decision was made to deepen the research with interviews.

Local Interviews

To represent as much as possible the varied reality of Blenio, the interviewees are chosen carefully. The insights and perspectives of the local producers or teachers are as important as those of the institutional figures.

- The FASV – resp. Leonardo Azzalini
- The butcher – Tiziano Vescovi
- The Farmer and Cheese Maker – Roman Marchi
- The Mayor – Claudia Boschetti-Straub
- The ERS-BV – resp. Loris Beretta
- The primary school – resp. Alice Vanetti

The interviews were conducted in an informal setting without a strict structure of questions, lasting between 30 minutes and up to 1 hour. Therefore, no exact transcript is proposed here, but a collection of the most insightful findings categorised into three topics: collaboration, futureproofing and tourism.

On collaboration

A subtle but recurring theme is that of cooperation and networking between the actors. As in every mountain village, everybody knows each other, however, not for productive interaction or collaboration but for geographical proximity. As a personal conclusion, some form of relationship between the actors is present, yet very superficial.

To begin with, the collaboration among local producers is limited. Surely farmers deal with forms of competition among them as they

¹¹ Francis Müller, *Design Ethnography*.

sell similar produces. However, instead of collaborating on a common vision or sharing knowledge, farmers are “jealous” of others’ success. The main example came from a cheese maker that started selling cheese with vending machines, and all others did the same, creating an uncontrolled secondary sale system.

Another theme became evident concerning the collaboration between locals and institutions. This manifested when questioning the butcher and the cheese maker about the Masterplan for the valley. Both claimed to have some knowledge about it, but with a shy attitude, they stated that it does not concern them, as it is a task for the institutions.

Yet the ERS-BV organises workshops to include and guide the local producers.

One form of productive collaboration is well established among the educational community.

The primary school and the Scuola Alpina have a regular collaboration. It is set in the school program that every school visits the FASV laboratories at least once during the studies.

Moreover, both schools supply material and visit the exhibitions that the public library and the museum organise and propose.

Concerning the collaboration with institutions, the municipality financed a roof structure for the “room in the forest” where the outdoor education week can take place.

Moreover, the ERS-BV is closely collaborating with the FASV and the private owners on the project for opening the Centralone and its gardens as a campus. Yet the main concern about such projects remains in the finances, which for an alpine municipality are obviously limited.

On futureproofing

Another interesting insight comes from the interview with the primary school teacher.

On the one hand, Blenio is an alpine reality, as 80% of the students grow up on farms with cows. On the other, the educational programs they must adhere to are too generalist and city-centred. This creates distance between what is learned and what is applied. Reducing the chances that children learn about the local crafts and might bring them on in the future

One big example is in the “milk day” in schools. Some cantonal animalist initiatives put pressure to remove such a learning opportunity, a measure that does not prove fit for an alpine agrarian community.

However, the teachers and the parents try to remedy this on a few occasional free days. For example, they organise afternoons at the local cheese maker or with the farmers, and during the “outdoor education week”, they learn the importance of the local forests.

In many cases, inhabitants and local producers have a traditional view towards the future. As mentioned before, farmers do not perceive their role towards the Masterplan and fail to create a solid common vision for the valley.

Alternative or innovative projects proposed are unwelcomed and blocked by more conservative views. This is clearly hindering the future development, as it happened for the proposal of a national park in the Adula region in 2016.¹²

The economic areas that are struggling the most are crafts and local production, as they are the least competitive to the city economies. The municipality offers help and support to people who wish to open a new business, such as two new hotels that will be renovated.

On tourism

As in every community that is confronted with tourism, there are those against it and those who benefit from it. This is true for Blenio too; however, it can be generalised that slow, aware tourism is welcomed by all and seen as a chance to revitalise the stagnating economy.

The municipality sees in the services for tourists – hotels and restaurants – the opportunity that more people might settle in the valley. Therefore, they are investing in forms of slow and local tourism. In the last year, financial support was given to the winter sports facilities – Campora and Campo Blenio – and the new TCS camping was funded by the municipality.

Currently, the local inhabitants who offer services to tourists are

¹² *Assemblea Parc Adula, 'Parc Adula'.*

very limited. There are a few holiday apartments, two cafes, but no restaurants or hotels. This trend is slowly changing with the camping place and two hotels that are waiting for the building application.

On the other hand, farmers are still doubting that tourism can be an extra source of income; they see it as a side hustle, for which only a few take the time and effort.

The ERS-BV takes strong inspiration from the Canton Graubünden, where agriculture and tourism came together and gave a future to many struggling valleys.

Through the association Pro Lucomagno more collaboration is created between Blenio and Disentis. Another vision is to create a governance that focuses all efforts on the same goal that serves everyone in the municipality.

Concerning the numbers, tourism moves the biggest amount of people and therefore money in an alpine region with beautiful nature. The TCS camping opened last year and counted around 10000 stays. The mayor was proud of the results and hopes it will spark the development of other realities in the valley. However, a few of the local producers were not convinced about the winter sport facilities, which also received finances, but are closing the years without profits.

Moreover, the FASV brings visitors to Blenio too, this diversifies the offer and generates added value. In a normal year, they have around 3000 participants visiting their workshops, coming from Europe and America, and they manage this with only seven collaborators.

Besides this, the collaboration with SUPSI is opening new opportunities for PhD researchers and theses from various departments – economics, pedagogy, ethnography and botany.

Shortly explained, the personal take that shaped the design process during the semester is the following.

Collaboration is too little for a mountain reality, where mutual help, cooperation and community feeling were the core nature of these realities facing harsh living conditions. As privileges grew, people did not rely on the help of neighbours, and the community fell apart.

Increased disbelief in the values that the region offers. Alpine realities are often confronted with the city's performance, economy and growth; however, such approach is destroying the specificity and the richness of alpine areas that do not lie in a competitive capitalistic economy. The cities need the remote areas for leisure and recuperation as much as the alpine realities need the urban centres for economic support.¹³

Fig.25 A traditional building in Olivone, the importance of restauration and renovation, acts of caring for values of tradition and history



¹³ Luigi Lorenzetti, 'La Città-Ticino e Il Rapporto Tra "terre Alte" e "Terre Basse"'.

2.2 Activities, Actors and Synergies

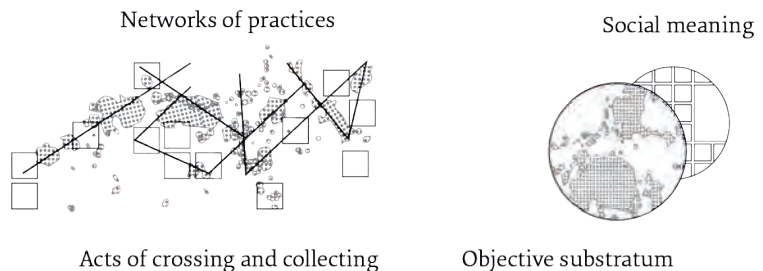
The observations and the interviews are the first step to understand the way of functioning of a social community. The ideology of Bruno Latour is used to gather the collected information within systems that can be analysed and understood.

The technicalities of the Actor Network theory from Bruno Latour – for how interesting – are not extensively discussed here.

However, a common understanding of the theory is given through a quote from Albena Yaneva in the book “Latour for Architects”:

“For ANT scholars, to explain is to engage in a practical world-building enterprise that consists in connecting entities with other entities, that is, in tracing a network, rather than engaging in social explanations and comparing cause with effect(s).”¹⁴

Fig.26 Actor-Network Theory diagrams from Latour for Architects



This method is applied to explain the social reality in Blenio, therefore understanding the dynamics and connections within and among the actors and their environment.

To make the information accessible a series of diagrams is proposed in the following pages.

¹⁴ Albena Yaneva, *Latour for Architects*.

365 days

The diagram reflects the activities that the actors perform as a sequence and as magnitude over the months in Olivone. The data is collected through a wide range of sources: interviews with the people, bus timetables, opening times of camping and cafes, and price rates for stays in hotels and apartments.¹⁵

The rhythm in the farming and productive bubble is mostly defined by the seasons. Similarly, this happens for tourism and the related activities.

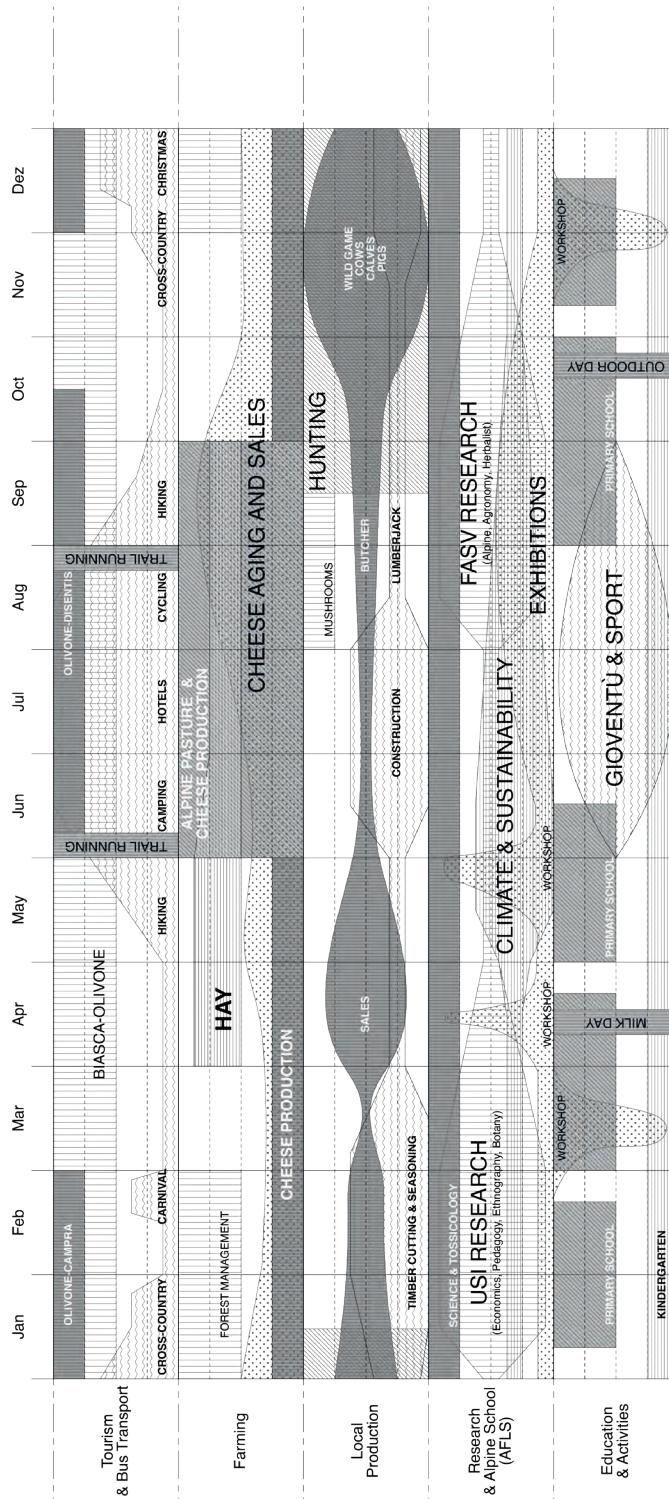
As the economy of Blenio is based on farming, many of the productive activities are closely dependent on it. The farmer is busy all year round, in summer the cows are in the alpine pasture, and cheese production is the focus as the milk is of better quality. At the end of September, the cows are back in the stables. This is the time to butcher the calves and to clean the fields and forest, thus the lumberjack and the butcher are in close collaboration with the farms.

The high of hunting season is in November, therefore the butchery focuses only on hunt games.

As spring progresses, the farmers shift to massive hay production and the hiking season starts. Tourists increase the sales rate for all the producers – cheese, meat and local production. Prices for stays are at the highest level, and additional bus services are offered. On the other hand, winter tourism is closely related to the availability of snow, declining with climate change.

Few activities are conducted constantly throughout the year: cheese production and storage, or the bus connection with Biasca serving daily commuters. Simultaneously, the toxicology laboratories and the Alpine Foundation allow for all-year-round activities with research in laboratories and workshops. Moreover, the Lucomagno pass road is kept clear from snow in wintertime, allowing for another crossway through the alps between Ticino and Graubünden.

¹⁵ TCS, 'Tariffe TCS Blenio'; 'Casa Lucomagno'; Autolinee Bleniesi, 'Orari Valle Di Blenio'.



Networks and opportunities

The diagram represents the network between the human actors in Blenio. As highlighted in the outcomes of the interviews, the collaboration among the community is scarce – the connections represent this graphically too. The main connections happen in the outermost circle, the one of the local producers as they rely on each other.

Currently, the FASV is a foundation that strongly profits from the link between the productive and the education spheres. The toxicology laboratories ensure a steady financial income to the foundation that allows the Scuola Alpina to offer workshops and education at a reduced cost for public schools and families. Moreover, the FASV is planning to open the historical villa – the Centralone – and its gardens into a research campus.

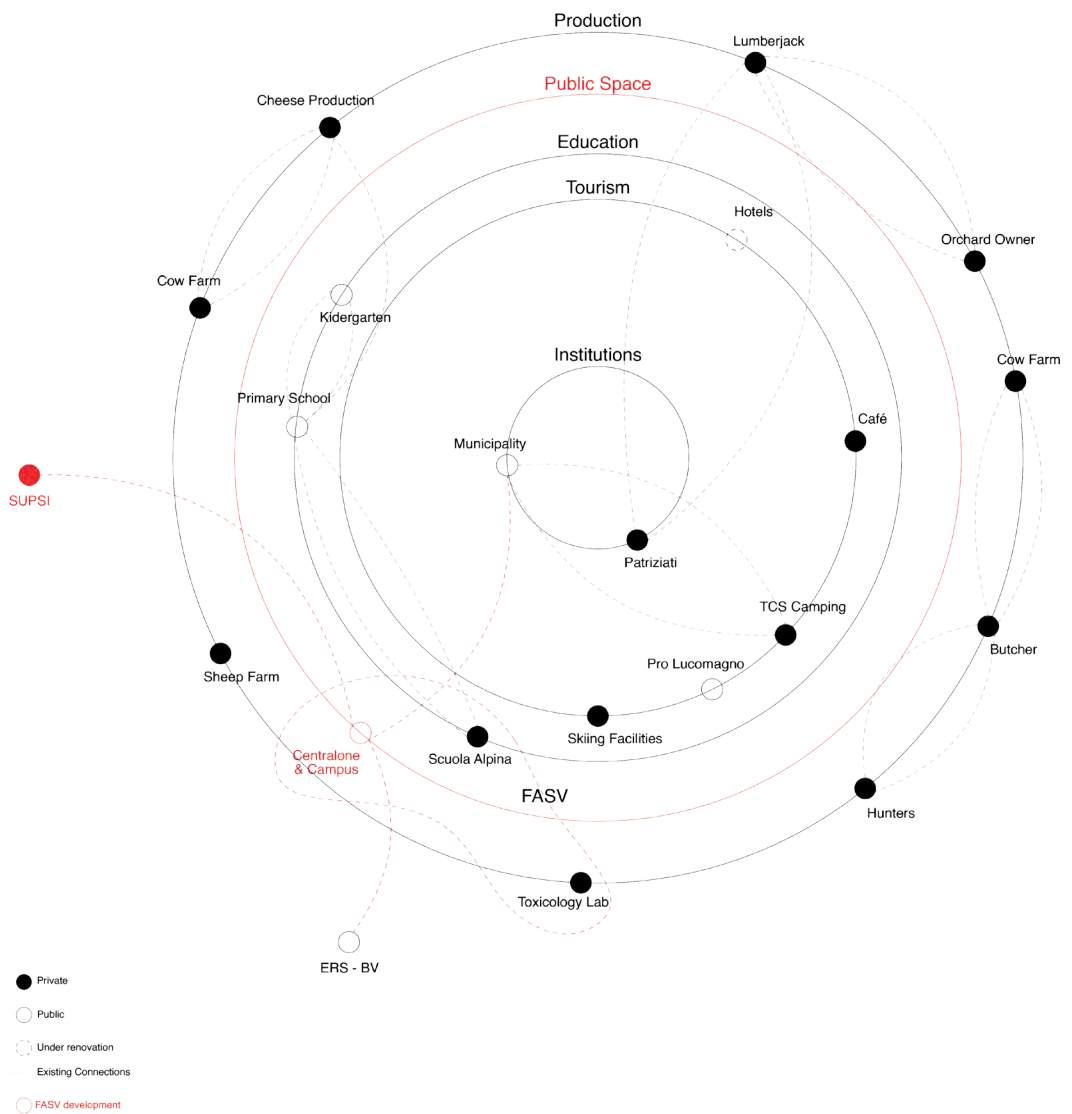
This project proves to be essential for the future of Blenio for two reasons. First, the project requires close collaboration among the foundation, the owners of the villa, but also the municipality, the ERS-BV and the SUPSI, effectively extending the area of influence for Blenio. Second, the opening of a 100-hectare park and a villa to the public influences the public space of Olivone at the village scale.

The self-sustaining approach from FASV and the research Campus inspired the thesis project. First questioning the role of the public space produced over the years. Second, creating a space that favours cross-collaboration beyond the spheres of influence of the single actors. The creation of a close-knit community that shapes its own future.

Figuratively speaking the project aims to bring the villagers and their activities out into the public and social space, so new networking can be established.

For example, through a common canteen where locals, visitors, researchers and tourists can share a meal. Moreover, by offering support spaces for the campus, the primary school, the farmers and the municipality, such as an exhibition space, temporary apartments for researchers and laboratories, storage space for farmers. At the same time, redeveloping the space directly in front of public buildings challenges the concept of roads and sidewalks.

The next diagram shows an early reflection upon the opportunities further explored in the thesis project. It represents both spatial and

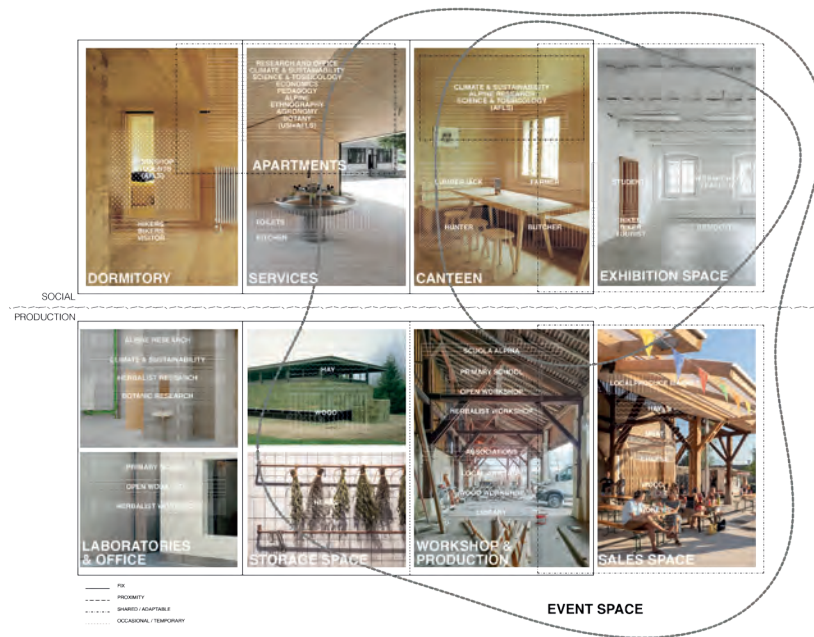


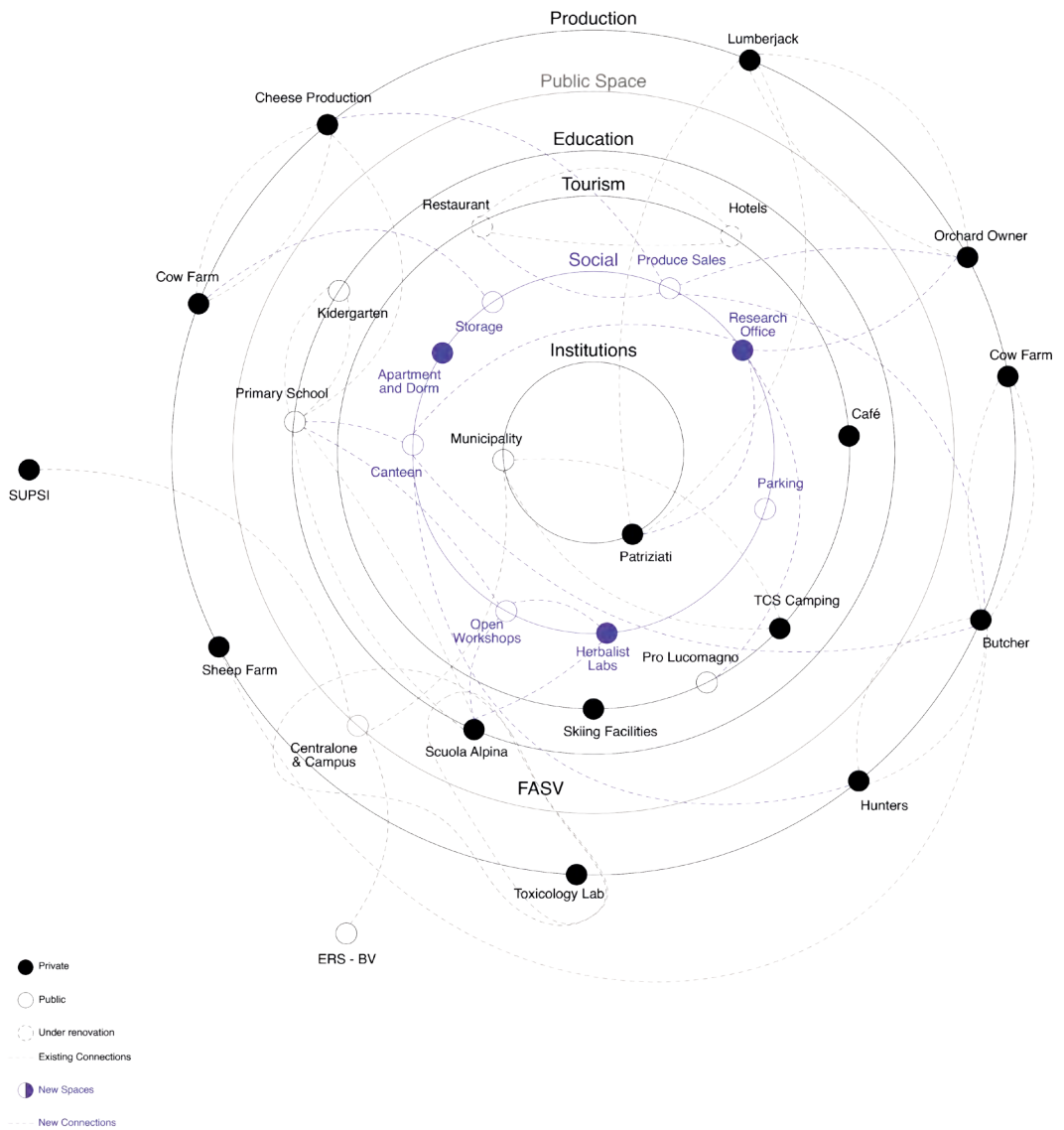
conceptual visions for the village in Olivone, as the idea develops upon the concept of simultaneity in architecture.

The intention is that multiple functions can use the same space, as they occur in different timeframes, thus without colliding with each other, spatially nor temporally. Moreover, the act of sharing physical space indirectly promotes a feeling of connection among the users, aligning with the thesis goal too.

In practice the dormitory and apartments can share service facilities with a canteen, such as a kitchen and toilets. Moreover, the canteen can serve as an exhibition space too.

Concerning the productive activities, a generous structure can simultaneously host laboratories, workshops, and provide storage space for farmers. In the case of an event that includes the whole village, the same structure can cover the maximum capacity, which otherwise would need a separate building.





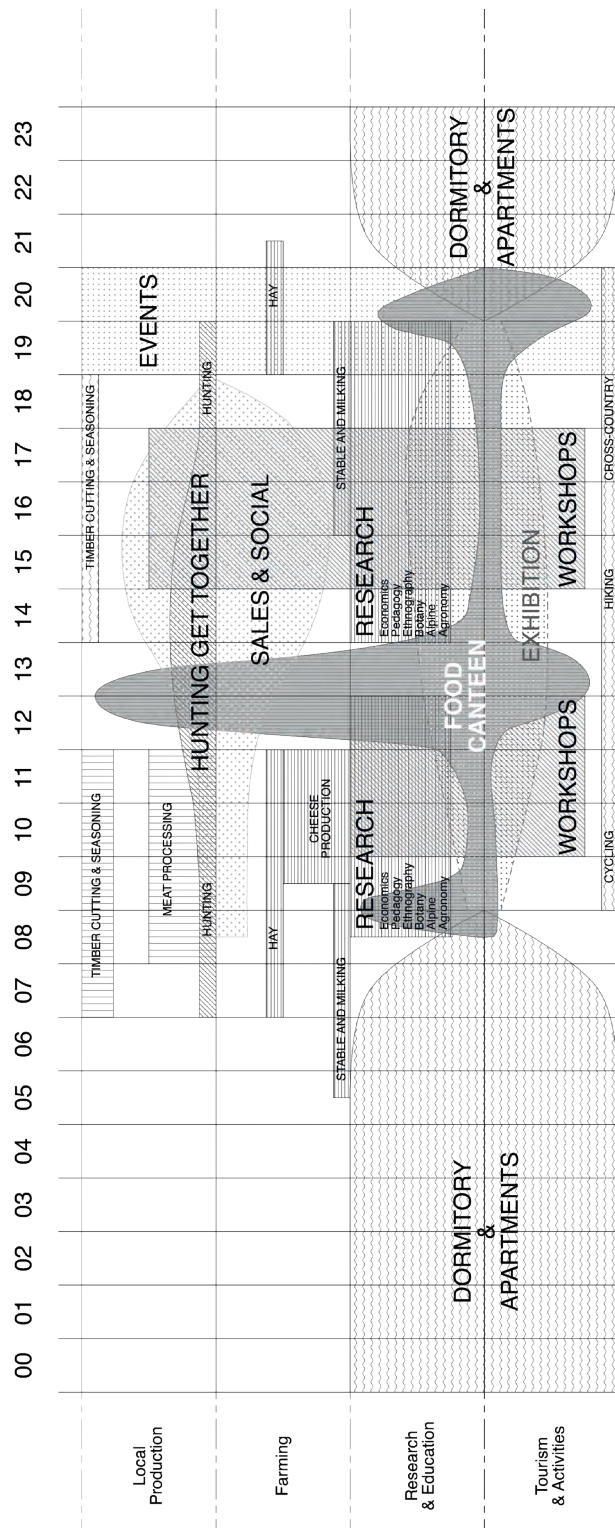
24 hours

To further develop the 365 days in Blenio, the following diagram represents the effects that the thesis project aims to create in the village of Olivone.

Using a storytelling technique, this is what an end-of-summer day might look like in Olivone:

The farmers start early in the morning with cheese and meat production. At the same time, students and researchers share the common spaces in the dormitory before going into the workshops. Between the enclosed laboratories, they can observe the ongoing exhibition organised by the library.

At lunch time, the canteen comes alive, the common kitchen and common tables suggest encounters. Hunters return and discuss with the butcher about the wild game; they stay until it's time for the evening hunt. Researchers and students go out into the field; farmers prepare their products on market stands between the exhibitions. The doors are open, and the public space extends beyond the structure of the building. The village festival will reunite everyone later in the evening after another meal together in the canteen.



3. Social problem or Spatial problem?

This section is the bridging point between the history and analysis of Olivone and the concrete opportunities identified and developed for the thesis work.

Unfortunately, literature lacks reserved vocabulary and research concerning the specificity of village dynamics as the efforts of the last century were pushed towards understanding city developments. Yet translating typical city related vocabulary could be a successful exercise. The book by Hertzberger inspires some of the following topics.

The chapter is divided into two sections: the social potential and the architectural potential. The first one represents the reflection points and opportunities identified as relevant for the thesis project from a conceptual point of view. The second part refers to the architectural approach and research.

3.1 *The social potential*

The specificity of village public life

In general understanding there are common elements, activities and situations that inherently characterise social life in a village. For example, villages have higher levels of social control when compared to cities. The few inhabitants know each other by name and are acquainted with daily routines; surely this reduces privacy, but at the same time it increases security as outsiders are easily spotted and controlled.

Another characteristic typical of villages is mixed levels of proximity. On the one hand, small basic facilities are closer compared than in bigger cities (school, café, bakery).

However, essential facilities such as hospitals are further away, forcing the villagers to rely on private transport. The issue is exacerbated as other basic services are being removed from villages (post offices, municipality offices) as results of decreased population and costs optimization.

In Olivone these dynamics left tangible traces: the reliance on private transport induced spatial planning to produce car-centred developments. Much of the available space has been asphalted and transformed into parking places.

Therefore, the lack of public space and an increasingly

individualistic society¹⁶ put the communal village life at serious threat, generating another issue for the public space. What once was a high level of social security that allowed for a utopian situation where pedestrian crossing and pavements were not a necessity. Nowadays, it has become a dangerous public space where children are forced to walk alongside cars and the villagers do not feel the responsibility to care for each other.

A quote from Anthos, a landscape architecture journal, describes these changes very well:

“In vormodernen Zeiten waren die Strassen und Plätze auf dem Land oft vielfältig genutzte Räume zwischen den Häusern, bisweilen gab es auch baumbestandene Wiesen in den Zwischenräumen. Noch ohne Autos boten sie den notwendigen Freiraum für das tägliche Leben. Was nicht in Haus und Stall oder auf dem Feld geschah, fand dort statt: Handwerker breiteten ihre Arbeitsgeräte draussen vor der Werkstatt aus, Kinder spielten auf den Strassen, abends sass man vor dem Haus. (...) Genau solche Dorfplätze verkörpern aber in den Augen vieler das überschaubare Dorfleben, das in jüngerer Zeit verloren zu gehen droht.” ¹⁷

16 Roncelli Laura, 'Fresh Perspectives for Blenio Valley'.

17 Maarit Ströbele, 'Der Dorfplatz Für Das 21. Jahehundert'.



Fig.27 Another open space in Olivone that is primarily a parking lot



Fig.28 Piazza d'Armi, view to the entrance of Denner, the supermarket



Fig.29 The parking lot behind the municipality building, empty most of the week



Fig.30 View of the San Martino hotel from the 90's.

“In pre-modern times, the streets and squares in rural areas were often multifaceted spaces between the houses, sometimes with tree-lined meadows in the in-between spaces. Before the advent of cars, they provided the necessary open space for everyday life. Whatever did not happen in the house, barn, or fields took place there: craftsmen spread out their tools outside their workshops, children played in the streets, and in the evenings people sat outside their houses. (...) Yet in the eyes of many, it is precisely such village squares that embody the close-knit village life that seems to be in danger of being lost in recent times.”¹⁸

The street

Hertzberger lists similar reasons that determined the crisis of the city street. But he introduces a new one, that of low density and bigger living space per inhabitant. He explains that, as homes became more spacious and comfortable, fewer people were attracted to the outside, hindering community development.¹⁹ This issue is surprisingly real for alpine villages too. Before modernity, limited accessibility to materials, higher efforts for heating and less financial ease determined an architecture of optimisation. The house offered shelter only for a few activities: sleeping and cooking. After the world wars, it became normal for each house owner to have a generous space and their own fenced garden. Therefore, this is another reason that roads were designed only for

¹⁸ Maarit Ströbele, 'Der Dorfplatz Für Das 21. Jahehundert'. (own translation)

¹⁹ Herman Hertzberger, *Lessons for Students in Architecture*.

cars; when instead they could have a living room quality for special occasions and for communal activities: play, exchange and get together.²⁰

In the project, this translates into increased density, buildings placed closer to each other and concentration of activity in the space outside the front door – the street and the square.

Fig.31 The village square as a place to be, instead of a passageway



20 Herman Hertzberger, *Lessons for Students in Architecture*.





The approach

The goals are clear: Olivone generally does not need a new invigorating impetus. Valuable functions such as the FASV or the farming industry are present, but they lack a public space to connect and grow in a community.

The question comes naturally: how to achieve this?

Before diving deeper into the case studies, the point of view of the architect Gion A. Caminada is relevant, particularly his text *“Für eine starke Peripherie der Schweiz: Neun Thesen zur Gestaltung der Kulturlandschaft / For a strong Swiss periphery: nine theses on the design of a cultural landscape”*.

Caminada sets the tone, stating: there is no room for nostalgia, but neither is there room for a schematic adoption of universal concepts.

- 1) Periphery as a catalyst
- 2) Clear differences between periphery and centres
- 3) Spatial planning should strengthen the autonomy of the periphery
- 4) An attractive landscape must grow from management methods
- 5) For an authentic and holistic mountain landscape and economy
- 6) The guest is as important as the local
- 7) The constant of the place forms the basis for the new architecture
- 8) High added value means a lot of work with low material costs
- 9) An aesthetic of the use

In summary, Caminada stresses how the alpine areas are inherently different from urban Switzerland and the difference should be preserved, not with a romantic nostalgia but an entrepreneurial approach.

The villages should retain their autonomy; the landscape, the economy, the cultural offer and spatial planning should evolve together supporting local diversity.

The cultural landscape transforms according to contemporary needs and methods (farming and construction) while reinforcing local qualities that define the identity and the autonomy of the periphery.²¹

²¹ Gion A. Caminada, *‘Für Eine Starke Peripherie Der Schweiz: Neun Thesen Zur Gestaltung Der Kulturlandschaft’*.

These points relate to the case studies that are described as follows. Besides, Caminada's ideology applies to villages both on the southern and the northern side of the Alps, in very different cultural regions.

*Fig.33 View over Campo
(Blenio)*



Case study, social: Ostana

With the last century wave of depopulation in the Alps, in 1985, the local administration defined a set of rules for the regeneration of the village of Ostana, Piedmont. The document defined three action points: to reinforce the local alpine culture and landscape, to unify the architectural approach to renovation or new construction, and to introduce a new tourism model.²²

In 2005 Ostana reached a low of 6 inhabitants, but the growth picked up, and in 2025 they reached 80; some inhabitants came back from the cities to their roots, but also newcomers contributed substantially to this number. Two are the main significant projects were realised in the last 20 years, their importance is related to their programmatic role. One is a “social foci” for the village, and the second is a transposition of what is normally a “city-based” research centre into a living laboratory.

“Lou Pourton” was completed in 2015, designed by a team of architects from the Institute of Mountain Architecture at Politecnico Torino – Massimo Crotti, Antonio De Rossi, Marie-Pierre Forsans. The building introduced new functions and collective use. It is a cultural centre where festivals, local exhibitions and educational activities are hosted.

While the Monviso Institute is a non-profit association that aims to restore and manage the abandoned hamlet of Serre Lamboi in Ostana as a mountain campus, while at the same time conducting academic experiments and research.²³

In a way, a similar methodology has been undertaken by Blenio Valley too. With the Masterplan, the goals for the valley are defined, and the projects allow them to be put into practice. Surely Ostana and Blenio differ in dimension and population, yet the approach is scalable.

²² Margherita Valcanover, ‘Ostana and Topolò: Hardware, Software and Welfare in “Return” Communities’.

²³ Antonio De Rossi, ‘Ostana: Architettura e Rigenerazione’.



Fig.34 Central path through Ostana. On the left the collective building



Fig.35 The new collective building, "Lou Pourton"



Fig.36 Areal view over Serre Lamboi, the new academic research centre

Case study, public space and repurposing: Valendas

A few years ago, the locals in Valendas referred to it as the “declining village”. Since 2005, the Verein Valenda Impuls has changed this, making it now a place to live and a holiday destination. Having survived mass tourism that compromised Flims and Laax, great importance was given to the preservation of the ISOS title from the Swiss Heritage Site. The goal was to preserve the historical building fabric and to contribute to the revitalisation of the village through local added value.²⁴

Among the realised projects, three present a great example for the conceptual revitalisation of alpine villages. Moreover, the spatial organisation of the interventions allowed to rethink the urban structure of the public space of the village.

First, the municipality gifted the Engihuus to the local foundation, with the condition of converting the building for the community. The architect Gion A. Caminada was in charge of the project, which opened in 2014 with a local pub, a small hotel and a communal hall. With the project, the outside public square with the historical fountain was renovated too.

Shortly after, the renovation of the Türalihuus extended the offer for tourism. An old baroque townhouse was converted in 2014 by Capaul and Blumenthal architects for the foundation “Holiday in a Listed Building”.

Lastly, the Graubünden Heritage Protection committed the renovation of the old school building. The architects Selina Walder and Georg Nickisch finished renovating in 2016. The building offers a multifunctional structure with an exhibition space, public restrooms and the visitor centre for the Beverin Nature Park.

²⁴ Bündner Heimatschutz, ‘Dorfentwicklung Valendas’.



Fig.37 The baroque townhouse



Fig.38 The pub and the square with fountain



Fig.39 The school building



Fig.37 – Fig.37 Before and after the renovations in Valendas, Graubünden





3.2 The architectural potential

Pavement

The streets, the space between the houses and the squares are the areas that create public space. Modifying their appearance and understanding their meaning deeply was essential to propose a public space that invites for encounters.²⁵ It felt natural to conduct material research in Olivone, which generated various questions. What are the local materials used for paving outdoor spaces? What role does the pavement play in traffic safety and water absorption in the terrain?



Fig.39 Traditional use of the local stone as structure in vineyards

The competition for a courtyard intervention in Winterthur (ZH) reveals the power of dedicated pavement. Rina Rolli proposes a sensitive approach towards the existing and defines thresholds between private access and communal use of the public courtyard with a fireplace. The courtyard creates a place for encounter while strengthening the collective identity.²⁶ The approach resembles an existing clearing with a fountain in Sallo, a hamlet of Blenio.

The most available local stone is the eye-gneiss with a very peculiar structure, characterised by small white crystals embetted. It is extensively used as roof material (piode), but also in vineyards with drywalls and structural elements (carasc), and it is suitable for construction and pavement.²⁷

²⁵ Maarit Ströbele, 'Der Dorfplatz Für Das 21. Jahehundert'.

²⁶ OFREIA, *Courtyard in Winterthur Competition*.

²⁷ Associazione Via della Pietra, 'Via Della Pietra'.

Project: 25WI
Location: Winterthur, Switzerland
Architect: Ofreia
Project Year: 2025 Competition

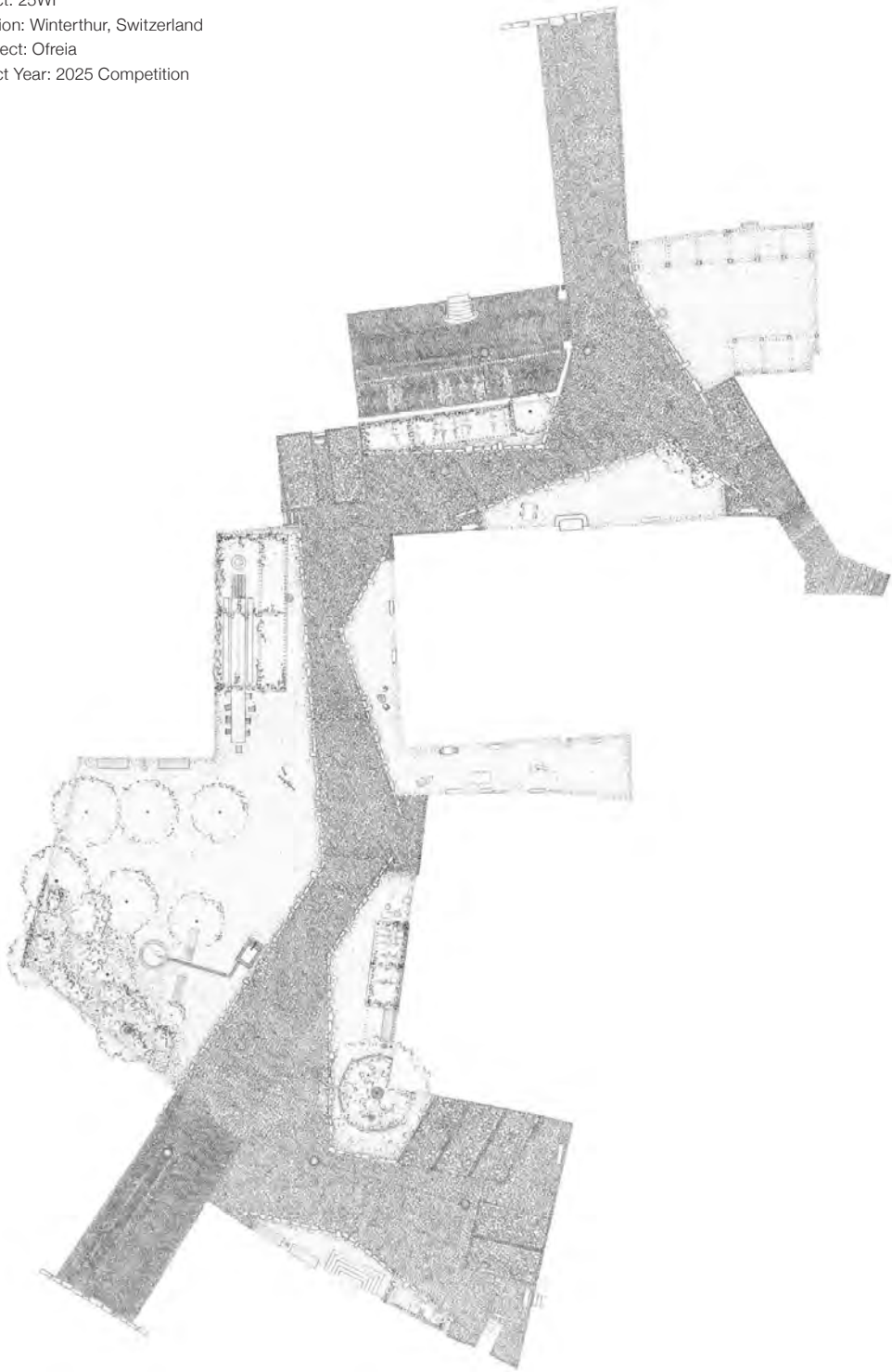


Fig.40 Ofreia, project for a courtyard in Winterthur



Project: Ticino Summer School
 Location: Sallo, Blenio
 Architect: i2A, Roi Carrera, HSLU
 Project Year: 2022

Fig.41 Public "room" in Sallo, traditional hamlet in Blenio. Characteristic is the use of the natural stone and the addition of a water feature in the centre, this creates a meeting point for the inhabitants. The fountain was a proposal of the summer school in 2022



Fig.42 Transition between different materials used in pavements

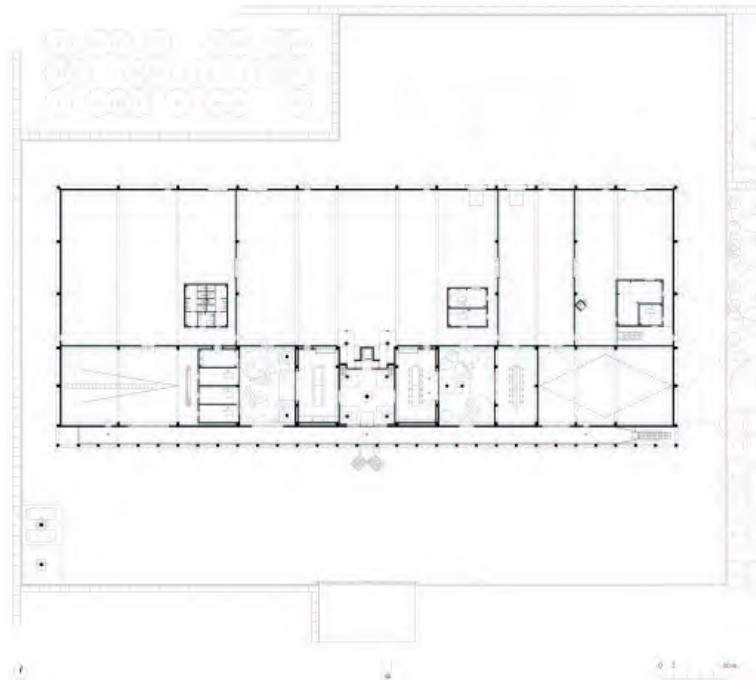
Fig.43 Gravel and stone pavements that ensure permeability of water by Bryum

Fig.44 A path way between houses in Olivone

Separation

The work with the pavement aims to blend the separation between zones, blurring the boundary between pedestrian and car space, between public/private, and between functions in general. On the one hand, this simplifies the merging of the community, the networking. On the other hand, some activities require the specificity of space.

The project Corcet Headquarters (2024) by Nuno Melo Susa Architects in Penafiel, Portugal, develops on the requirements of spatial openness and enclosure.²⁸ A wide hall where shelves and pallets collect as needed, while white calcium silicate blocks define the spaces for toilets, offices and meeting spaces. Although this structure is very closed off from the outside, the ecosystem works fluidly from within.



²⁸ Nuno Melo Susa, *Corcet Headquarters*.



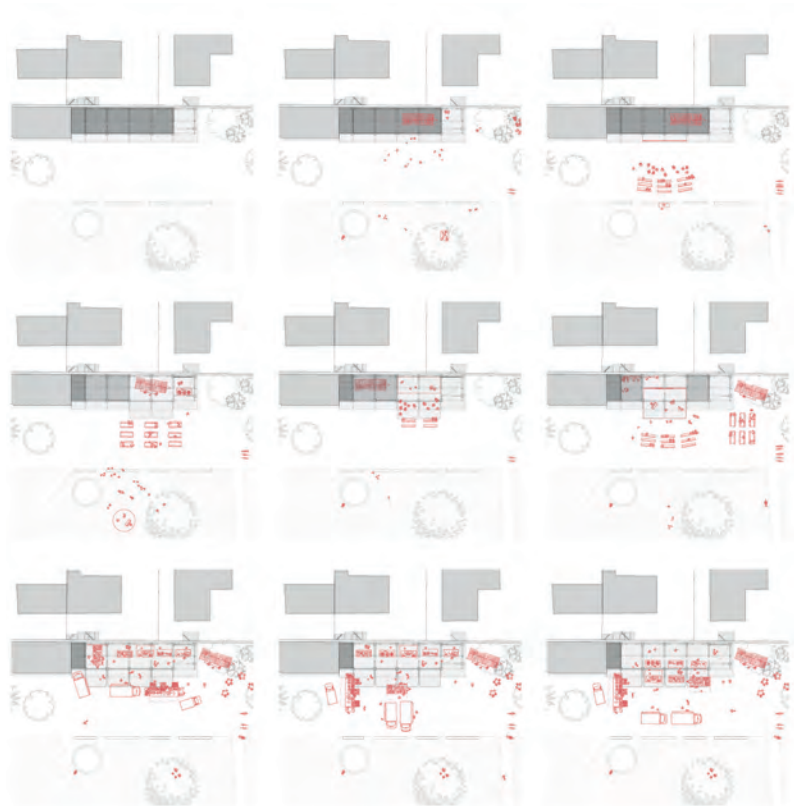
Project: Corcet Headquarters
 Location: Penafiel, Portugal
 Architect: Nuno Melo Susa
 Project Year: 2024

Fig.45 – Fig.45 The defined room create an indirect division of the hall spaces. The various element can interact even in a playful way within a fairly standardised space

Threshold

On the contrary, the Halle Polyvalente (2022) by PNG in Coublevie, France, is doing the opposite. A former wooden storage structure, it has been repurposed into a multi-functional space that opens to the outside, becoming a highly public space.²⁹

A simple solution that allows for different scenarios to take place with minimal modifications.



²⁹ PNG, Halle Polyvalente.



Project: Halle Polyvalente
 Location: Coublevie, France
 Architect: PNG
 Project Year: 2022

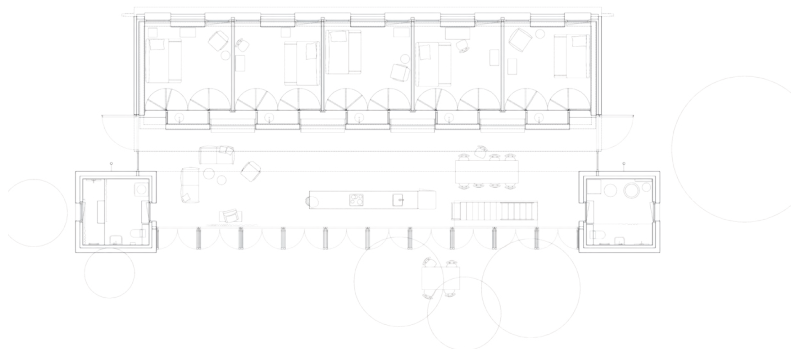


Fig.48 – Fig.48 The building changes drastically aspect with the different set ups and activities. When closed it seems a very functional building, when open and inhabited with people it becomes a rich and vivid place for encounters

Permeability

In “House for Five Women” (2025), permeability towards the outside and privacy of units is elaborated to the maximum. The house from TEN Architects offers shelter for women who survived war and social injustice. It offers a model for care, mutual support and community engagement. To achieve this, the architecture plays an essential role.³⁰

The communal spaces – kitchen, eating and living room – and the outdoor areas are not separated, as one is the continuation of the other. A layer of openable windows protects from the weather. Moreover, the private rooms are aligned alongside the public space, as if it were a street defined with wet rooms at both ends.



30 TEN, *House for Five Women*.



Project: House for five Women
Location: Bosnia Herzegovina
Architect: TEN
Project Year: 2025

Fig.51 – Fig.51 The most generous space of the house features a sequence of dining cooking and living spaces. Sharing daily activities is a start to find stability for the women whom suffered war injustice. The regeneration comes from sharing and mutual support

Structure

Recalling Caminada, the architecture in mountainous areas should develop from the existing conditions. In Blenio local timber is widely available; thus, a wooden structure is foreseeable for the project, yet it should differ from traditional barns built in previous centuries. In Dobrava, Slovenia the roof structure protects the archaeological remains of a church. For the architect Oton Jugovec, it was essential to minimise the contact point to the ground, thus only two columns support the thatched roof.³¹

This move also creates the maximum openness for the landscape to continue seamlessly and to remain undisturbed by human-made.

Fig.52 *Seemingly a floating roof, the vertical elements of the structure are kept to the minimum*



Project: Protecting structure for archaeological findings
Location: Dobrava, Slovenia
Architect: Oton Jugovec
Project Year: 1970

31 Oton Jugovec, *Floating Roof*.

Minimal changes

In "More than a Door" the architecture practice ALIAS intervened with opening a single door in the Kunstmuseum in Bern; they did this to create a simple side emergency exit, to avoid reducing the number of visitors per time or creating complex escape routes initially expected by the clients. This simple approach has the generous potential to open up a building.

Applied to the municipality building in Olivone, a completely closed off facade takes on a new meaning, inviting workers for a break or visitors to cross the public entrance hall, and read the story of Blenio.

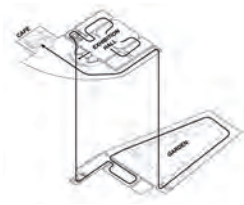


Fig.53 Diagram showing the proposed escape route. Exiting from a back door and through the garden.

Fig.54 An opening in the wall, no big structural change, yet a big impact.



Project: More than a Door
Location: Bern, Switzerland
Architect: Alias
Project Year: 2025









Part Two **4. The Project**
Architecture Typology and Use
Pavement

5. Conclusion







4. The project

The previous part of the book presents the groundwork conducted alongside the architectural project. It is the collection of relevant information, analysis and reference projects. It is the backbone of the thesis and the following part presents the project proposal in concrete terms.

The definition of the thesis project starts from two existing conditions.

First, the presence of a sequence of public spaces in the urban fabric of Olivone. Spaces which lack quality from the perspective of pedestrian users, as they are essentially parking lots.

Second, the activities taking place in Blenio, the commercers and the educational campus planned to be developed in the Centralone.

Historically Blenio developed on the left and right side of the Brenno river with small hamlets. The church and the museum define one of the first public ensemble. Then the village grew along the cantonal pass road of Lucomagno. The sequence continues in front of the townhall, then Piazza d'Armi and flows across the river across the Casa Patriziale and the hotel La Posta.

The project takes shape between the sequence starting from the bridge, entering in Piazza d'Armi, reaching the Centralone villa and arriving until the church. The overall goal is to improve the existing public spaces, while creating new ones by adding few new volumes. This is done by removing the asphalt and paving only where necessary with local stone.

The new built structures support the FASV campus development; one existing building is transformed into temporary apartments, and three new buildings offer one dormitory, a canteen and a public infrastructure building. The last two wish to serve the inhabitants too, therefore it is a mixed-use building featuring workshops and laboratories for the Scuola Alpina and local artisans, event space and storage space for markets and town festivals.

Piazza d'Armi is the first opening that a visitor meets when arriving in Olivone. It already presents an urban situation, with a supermarket, a café and other daily service shops. In this case, the empty building in the corner is repurposed as temporary apartments for the guest researchers at the FASV.

The subsequent space is defined by the hotel with restaurant under renovation, the proposed building with dormitory for the students visiting the Scuola Alpina or the sport enthusiasts visiting in summer and winter. Five parking garages are opened for other functions, a wood working workshop and artisan. The last element framing this zone is a 14 m high green slope.

To cover the height difference, a new path and a wheelchair accessible ramp are proposed. They become the shortcut far from the road for the slow traffic.

Ground floors existing (grey) and new (purple)







Previously a field next to the asphalt parking lots would break the spatial sequence as all the buildings tend to distance from the road passing between them. The townhall has a windowless façade and the schools have fences to protect the children.

Two proposed buildings aim to change the existing approach and turn the buildings again towards the street to complete the public room that leads to the campus and the church.

The point building is the common canteen, with an open kitchen on the ground floor and rooms on the first floor for associations and local companies.

While to activate the north side of the municipality a service door is opened, creating a public connection through the building.

The linear building is the defining element; it captures the traditional way of living that is being lost in Olivone. The building offers a shelter for all those activities that don't need to happen in the house but can extend into public space. Workshops, public assemblies, events and markets. Yet, as the streets are dangerously populated by cars, this spatial opportunity is moved under the roof of a permeable building.

“Whatever did not happen in the house, barn, or fields took place there: craftsmen spread out their tools outside their workshops, children played in the streets, and in the evenings people sat outside their houses.”³²

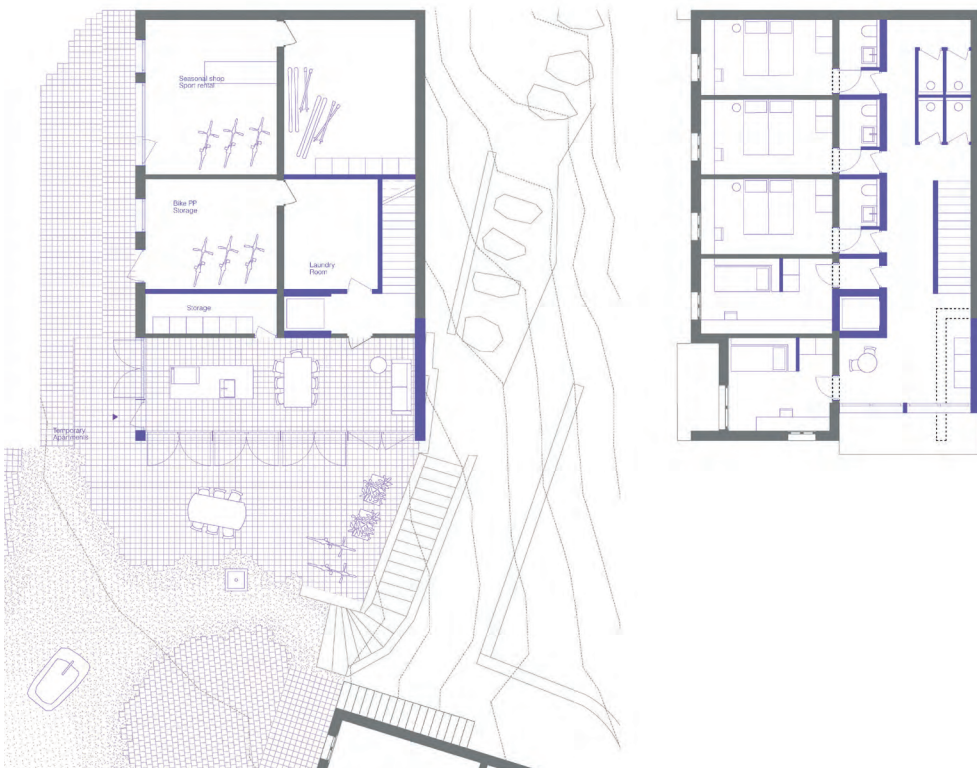
First floors existing (grey) and new (purple)

32 Maarit Ströbele, 'Der Dorfplatz Für Das 21. Jahehundert'. (own translation)

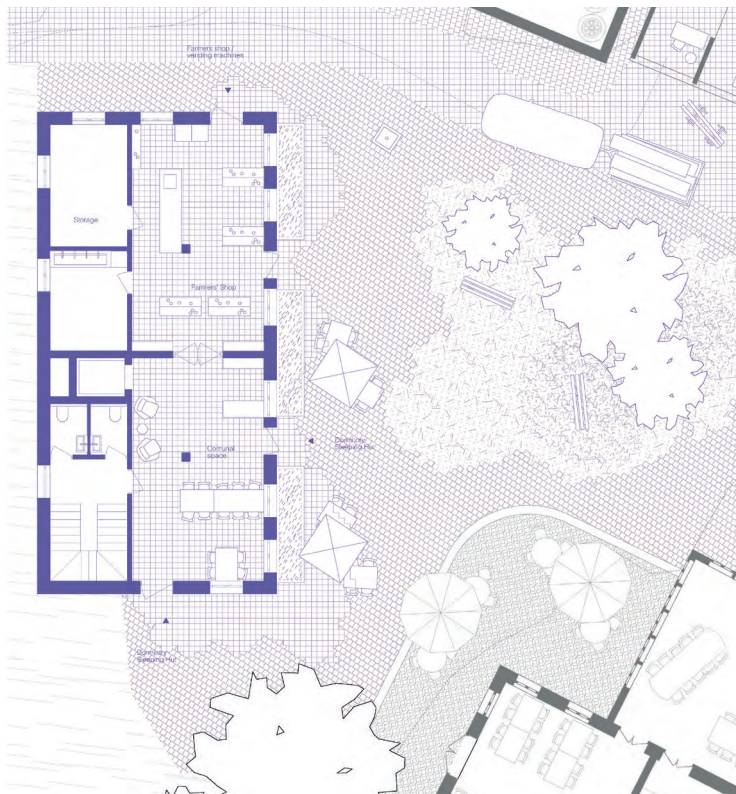


The architecture of the canteen, the dormitory and the temporary apartments relate closely to the local building tradition: thick load bearing walls with regular openings in the facades. They floorplans are simply organised; functional buildings offering the necessary rooms and nothing more.

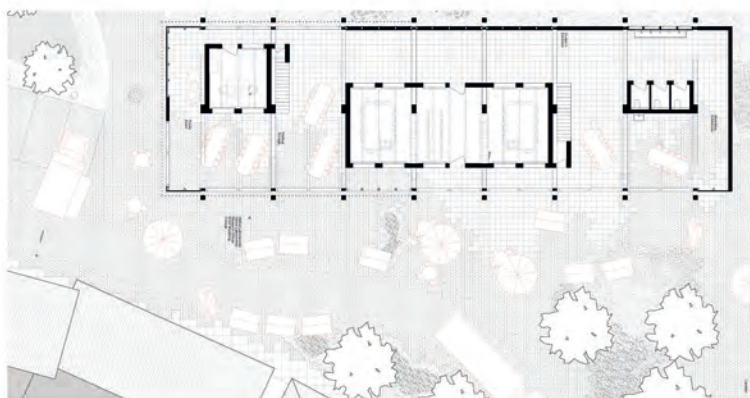
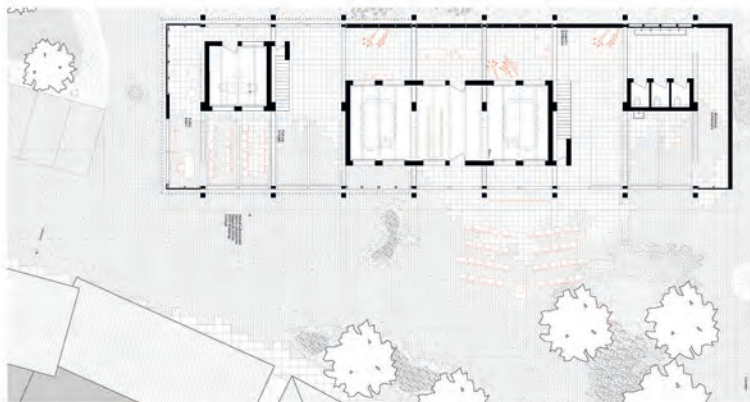
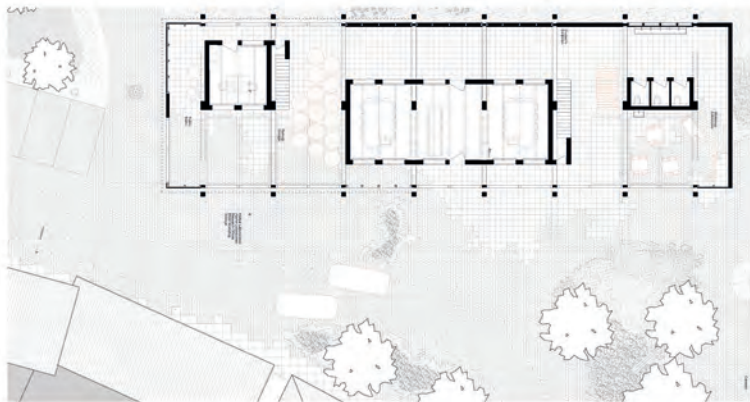
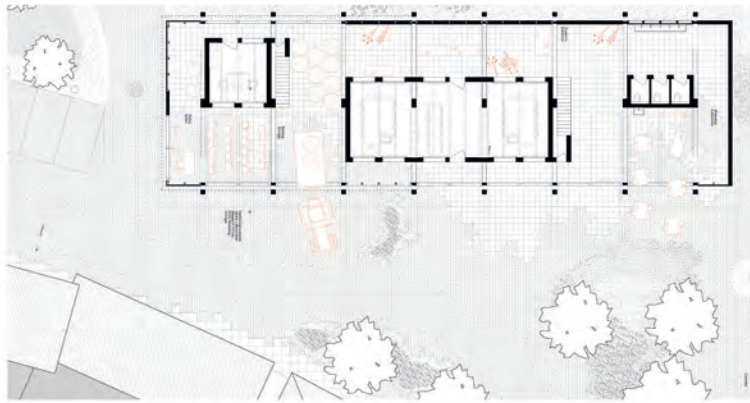
A quiet room and a bed for sleeping, a kitchen for cooking and tables for eating. Accessory rooms are superfluous, as they prevent people from going outside and connect with the other inhabitants.



Temporary Apartments, Ground floor (left) First floor (right)



Dormitory, Ground floor (left) First floor (right)



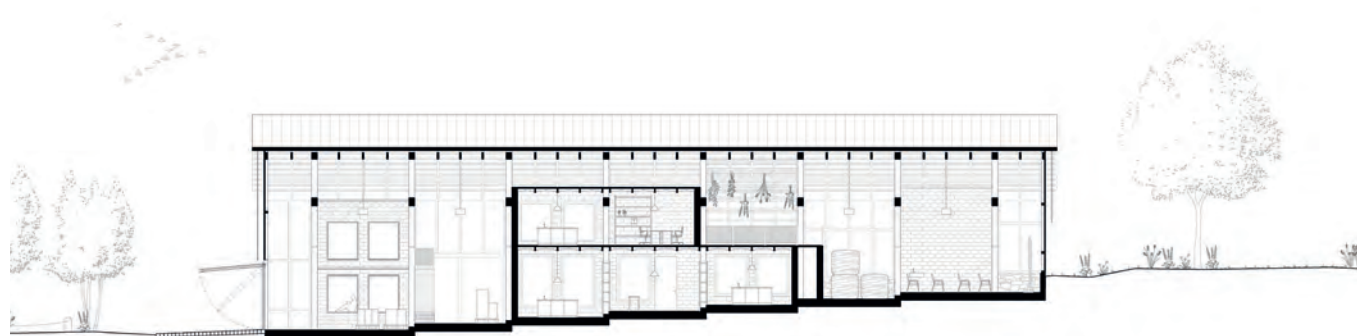
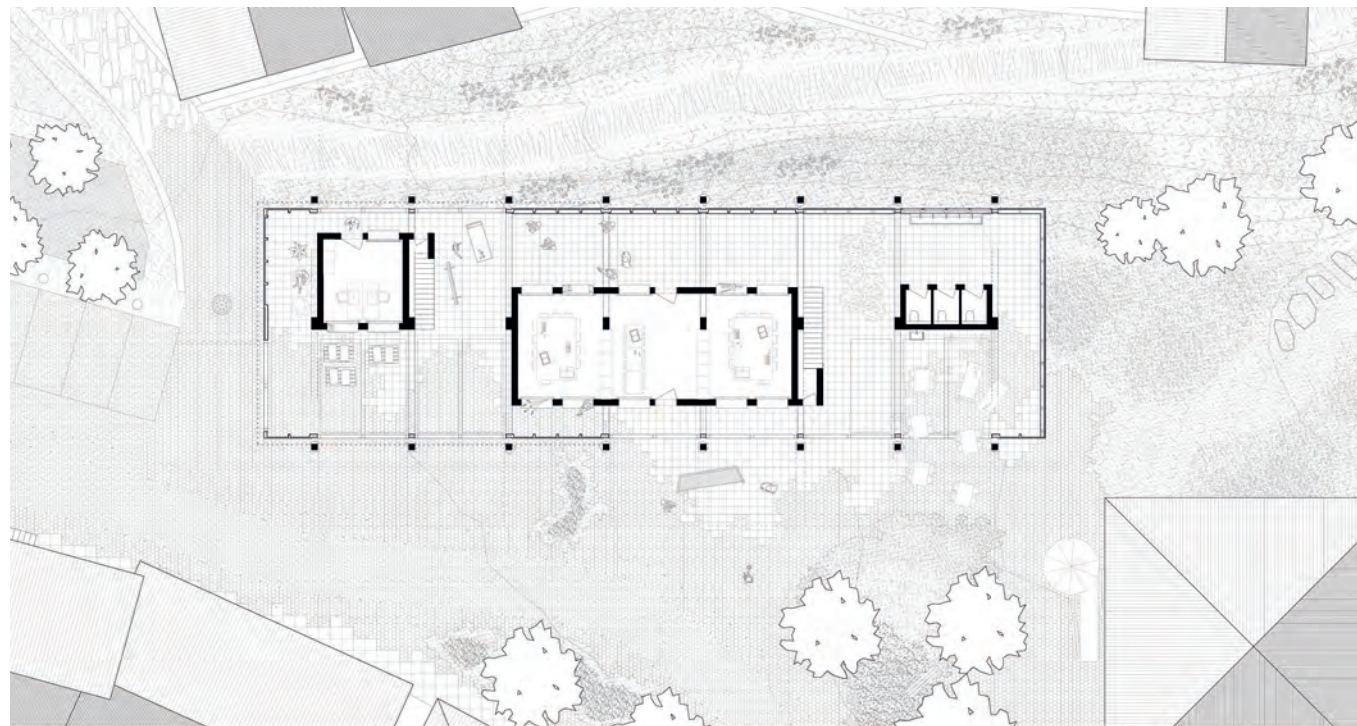


The longitudinal building is the central infrastructure that aims to bring the people together. Its architecture deals with topics of threshold, openness and enclosure.

Many of the functions envisioned to happen in the building are temporary and can be conducted in an open and shared space, such as markets and events or the storage of agricultural produce. However other functions require the specificity of a room, such as science laboratories or office spaces for the FASV.

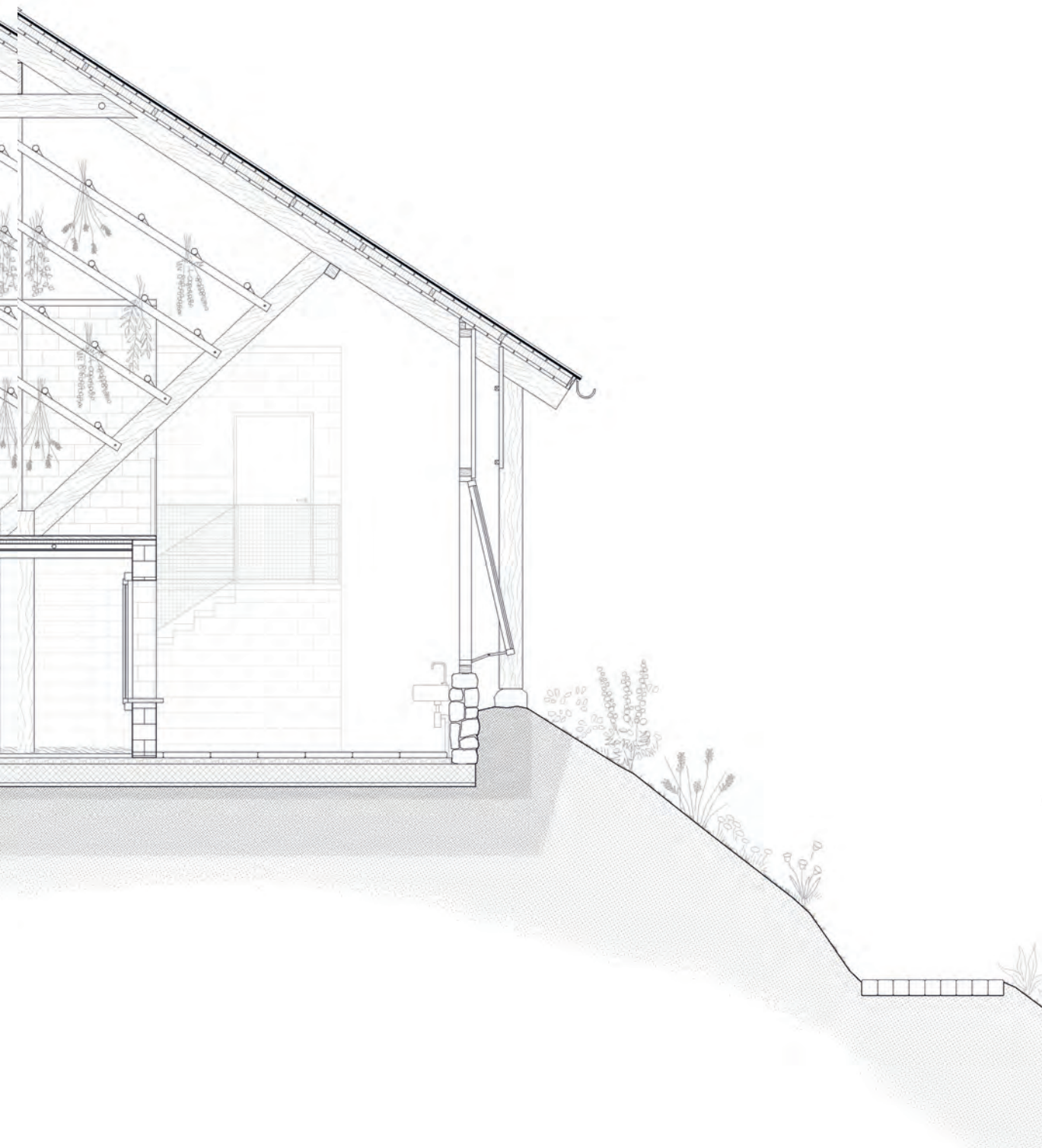
The architecture responds to this requirement combining an open and porous wooden portal structure, where the various spaces are defined between the two-floors rooms enclosed in brick walls. Therefore, the building acts as the threshold, the transition and connection of areas that have different spatial qualities. From the very public street to the private rooms, passing through the public building. And most importantly, this separation is not hard nor fixed; it expands and changes based on the cases and situations, through the opening and closing of doorways.

This approach derives from Hertzberger's analysis of territorial claims explains how a building can integrate a sequence of different gradations of accessibility. Therefore, when entering the building one feels to be in a public sphere – as the pavement and the porosity suggest. Yet within the space, separated units or islands offer privacy and specificity.



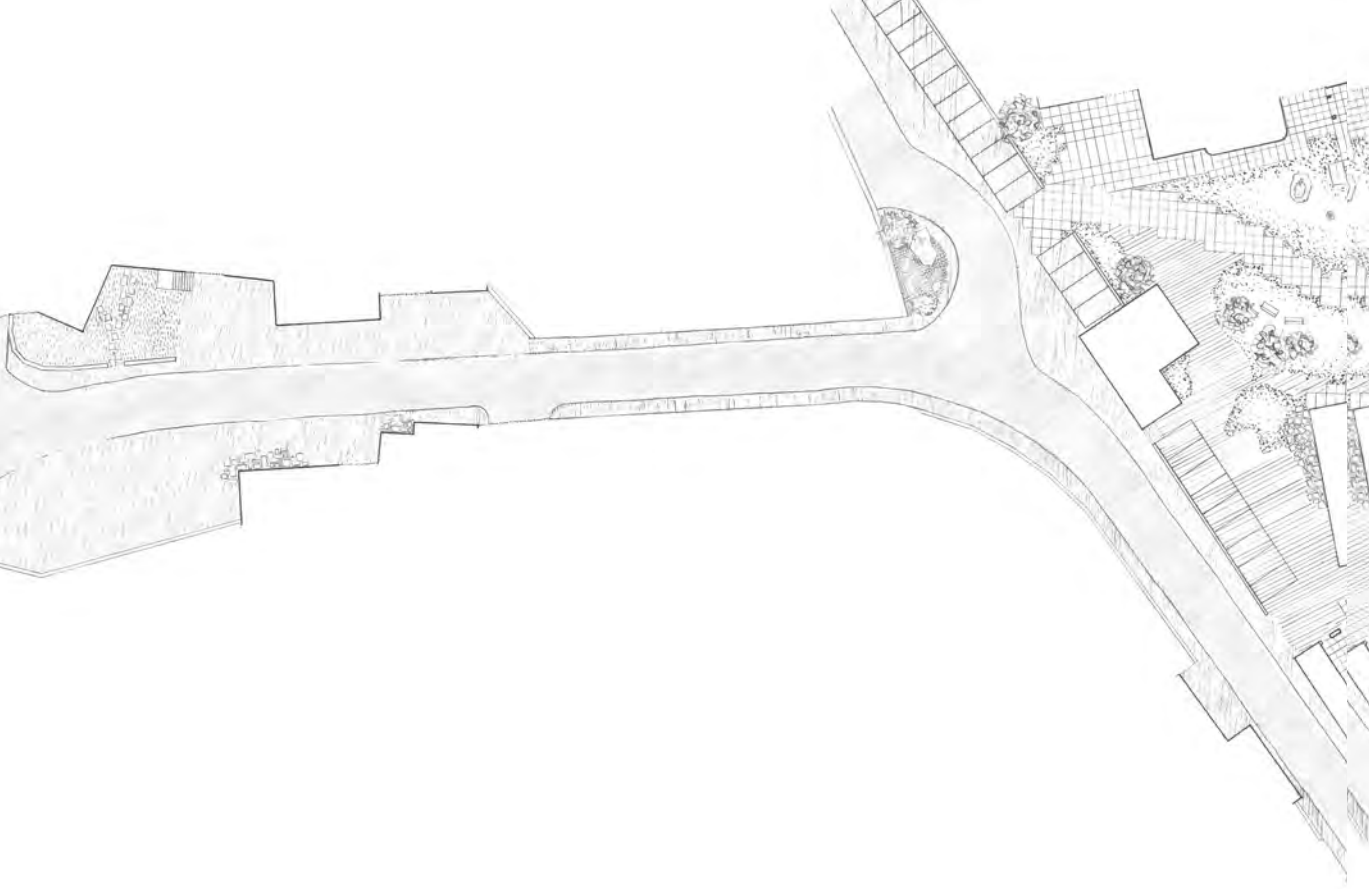
Multipurpose Building, Ground floor (top) Longitudinal Section (bottom)













Specifically, the pavement is given an important role throughout the whole project.

First, it is a strong unifying element of the extent of the intervention. It gives direct visibility of the sequence and opening of public spaces mentioned before.

Second, the changes in the pavement – material or pattern – generate an indirect zoning and expansion of space.

This is visible in the ground floors of the proposed buildings, as the pattern of the pavement flows inside the buildings, extending public into private space and vice versa.

The longitudinal building represents this best. There are no sharp edges between the street and the building pavement, it gradually shifts creating a gradient. Smaller stones outside to ensure permeability, while bigger tiles permit easier use of the indoor space. The clear change of flooring only happens within the enclosed room, defining the change in privacy too.

Similarly in the dormitory and the apartments, the pavement extends into the building there where the functions allow for a shared approach. For example, in the kitchen, the common areas or the local produce shop, floor to ceiling windows open directly towards the space in front of the building, in a sort of terrace for the users.



Removing the asphalt for a more natural and grounding material – as local natural stone – removes the focus from car use of the space. Car accessibility is kept as the street is a main access and tractors can access the building, yet the definition of the driveway is less prominent. Vehicles are forced to slow down creating a safer environment for pedestrians and the absence of crossing marks on the streets can remain a fundamental value for the village.

The ground is made permeable with changes in pattern and by leaving grassy and gravel zones. Alternative uses can take over the space, a space to play around the fountain or a place to stop under the trees shadow.

The public space becomes an endless flow from front doors to pavements, and from gravel paths to grass pastures. A space where informal encounters happen between farmers and researchers, children and tourists. The public room where networking and togetherness shape the future of an alpine village.





5. Conclusion

An architectural thesis project in a struggling alpine village might seem a bit distant from the current academic discourse, which rightfully remains focused on the densification of cities and urban futures. One might recall to Studio Basel controversial idea about abandoning the alpine fallow lands, as the unproductive and recession zones. However, it is essential not to let these peripheral villages disappear even if financial support is required; because the village-city relation is more bidirectional than people believe. To begin with, cities depend on multiple levels on the presence of remote areas, being for leisure and regeneration and raw material supply. Moreover life in a village develops upon different values than in cities – proximity to nature, sense of belonging and a slower paced life. A different idea of wealth that can attract new inhabitants or recall those who left.

Through spatial observations, mapping, and local interviews, it became evident that the challenges that Olivone must face are not just economic or demographic, but fundamentally spatial and social. On the one hand the valley economy struggled to keep up with cities competitiveness during the 20th century, while the farming techniques required less workforce with the use of machinery; this combination led more people to relocate to the cities and the decline of the villages was inevitable. On the other hand, the society became more individualistic and changed drastically, the focus shifted from creating community to serving the single person. One example is the over availability of parking places for individual transport. Yet Olivone holds potential for integration and regeneration, as local actors still believe in a collective future for Blenio, they developed a Masterplan which includes an alpine educational centre and conscious tourism.

Ultimately, the thesis project shows how architecture can actively support these values. By extending the sequence of public spaces in Olivone and offering a program for the network of actors. A common canteen, a dormitory and temporary apartments, but also workshops for local crafts and laboratories for the Scuola Alpina. The project shifts the priority away from cars and gives it back to the inhabitants. Public space becomes a fluid, permeable relational infrastructure that turns into an endless flow from front doors. It creates a shared public room where informal encounters happen, trying how architecture can build the social proximity needed to keep alpine villages alive, connected, and resilient for the future.











i.

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iii.

Declaration of originality

I hereby declare that the present work, entitled:

Alpine Common Ground

The importance of human-centred public infrastructure for the
regeneration of Olivone, Blenio Valley

is entirely my own work, that no sources or aids other than those
indicated have been used, and that any passages in this work that
have been taken verbatim or in substance from other works—
including electronic media—have been clearly identified as
borrowed material, with the source cited.

Roncelli Laura

Luzern, June 23, 2026

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