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TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION

The roots of the Disentis monastery go back to the year 720 AD: the site developed rapidly from the original hermitage. Despite its eventful history—including the fire in the archive and library during the French Revolution in 1799, the loss of half of the monastery's wealth and its possessions in the Valtellina—the monastery remained a centre of learning and spirituality even in the 20th century. In 2006, another fire destroyed the farm belonging to the monastery. The recent turning point raised the question of whether the monastery should continue its agricultural activities. Reflecting on their traditional role as intermediaries between education and agriculture, the Benedictine monks decided that the farm should be rebuilt.

After a year and a half of planning, the Grisons architect Gion A. Caminada presented his project in March 2008 and the decision was made to begin construction. The new buildings were designed to empower the monastery to serve the common good. In this process of re-adjustment, the architect acted as a moderator and a source of inspiration, focusing not only on the structure but mainly on the conditions for successful investments.

The buildings of the open monastic community, comprising the abbey, convent school, Alpine dairy and stable, are turned into a special place of education and experience. The special relationship between nature and culture in this region is taken as a theme and transformed into innovative, forward-looking construction strategies. The central element is the desire to develop a new educational community involving the monastery, the people of the valley, students and visitors.

Salaplauna—as the farm and Alpine dairy are collectively known as—becomes a forum for the discussion of regional agricultural concerns. The new monastery stable, built entirely of wood from the region and equipped with a photovoltaic system on the roof, is functional and also used for viewing: standing on a catwalk, visitors can experience life in the stable without disturbing the livestock. Though the Alpine dairy was specifically designed not to be a showcase, the key elements can still be seen by visitors—parts of the storeroom for the cheese and the shiny copper of the kettle. In keeping with the character of the new building constructed for the girls' boarding school in 2004, these two new buildings are also devoted to learning and fostering a sense of community. Given the structural changes affecting agriculture, it remains to be seen whether the standards set here for the cultivation of the landscape are adopted in the region as a whole.

The monastery's careful reflection and insistence on its own profile, together with the attention paid to local and regional features in the execution, make this a courageous and future-oriented process. As the vital activity of tourism is inextricably linked to the cultural traditions forged by the historic use of the landscape, the work provokes thoughts that resonate beyond the local and regional environment.

AWARD

OVERALL PROJECT FOR THE BENEDICTINE MONASTERY AND AGRICULTURE IN DISENTIS (GR)

Location

Disentis Benedictine monastery; Sennaria Surselva, Via Lucmagn, Disentis

Client

Disentis Benedictine monastery; Sennaria Surselva, Disentis

Team

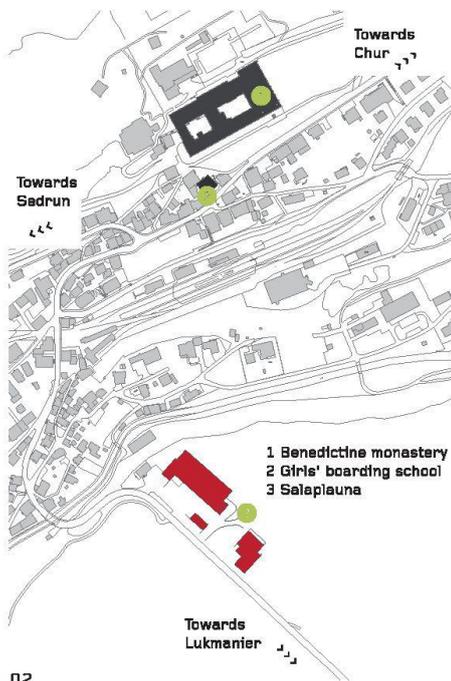
Architecture: Gion A. Caminada, Vrin
Civil engineers: Walter Deplazes, Surrein;
Iso Mazetta, Disentis/Mustèr
Agriculture: Cantonal Office of
Geoinformation and Agriculture, Chur

Planning and execution

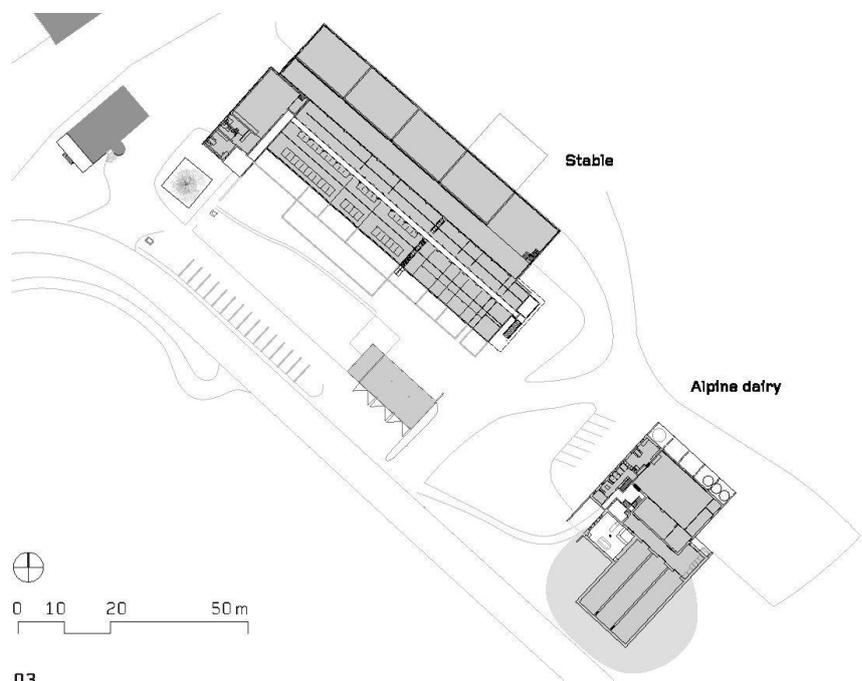
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01



02



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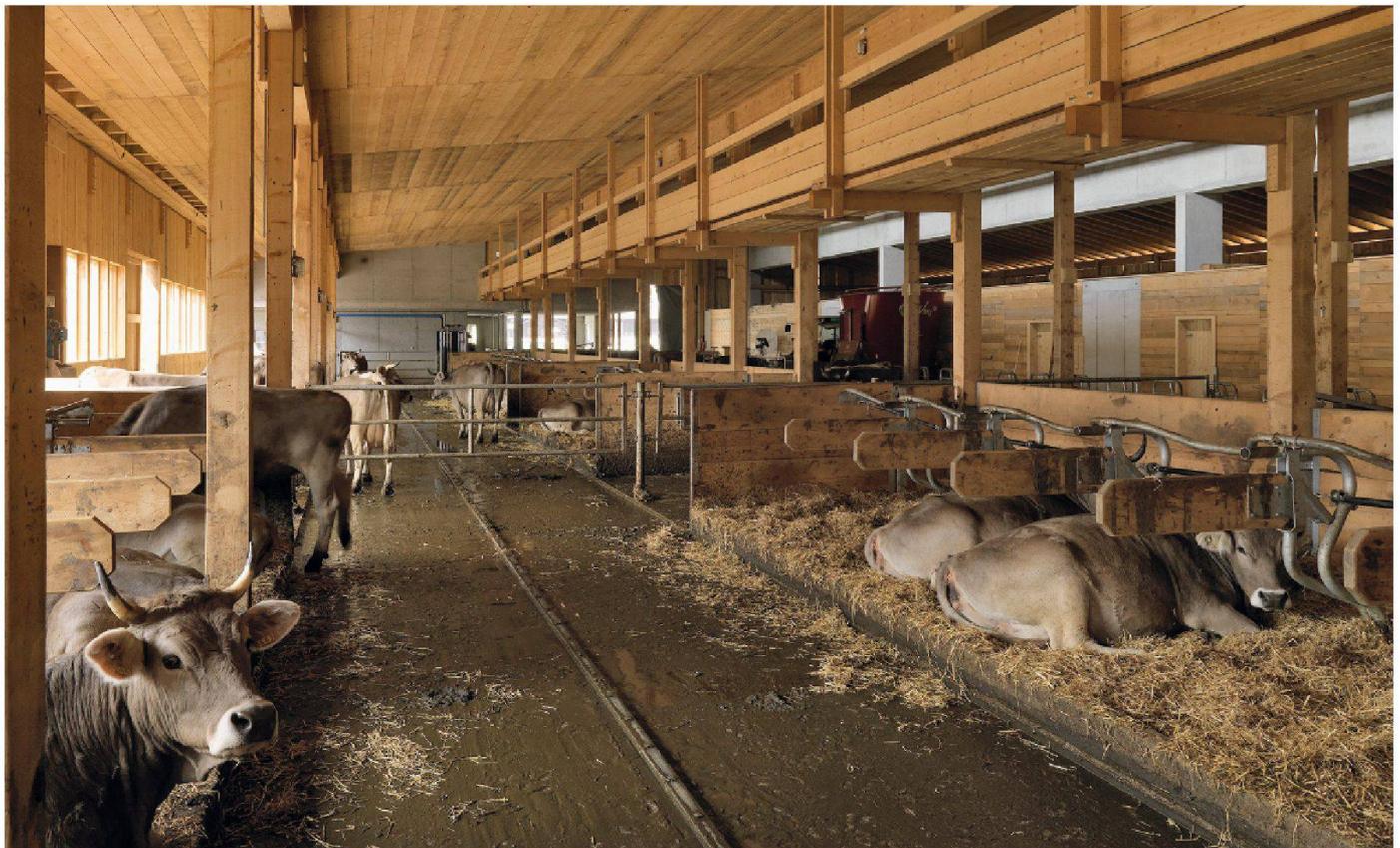
01 The Benedictine monastery dominates the view of Disentis. The girls' boarding school (see map) and the newly built Salaplauna farm (foreground) are located on the outskirts of the town (photo: Lucia Degonda)

02 Map (plans: Studio Caminada)

03 Plans of the stable and dairy



02 IUCN extension, Gland (VD) (photo: Reinhard Zimmermann)



03 Farm at the Benedictine monastery, Disentis (GR) (photo: Lucia Degonda)



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01 Overall project for the Benedictine monastery and agriculture in Disentis (GR)
(photo: Jules Spinatsch)