

A future for our past

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A FUTURE FOR OUR PAST

by Rita Fischler

In July 1973, the preparatory conference was held in Zurich for the European Architectural Heritage Year which the Council of Europe had proclaimed for 1975.

More than 300 delegates from 27 European and some Middle-East countries took part. The meeting, under the chairmanship of British M.P., Sir Duncan Sandys, President of "Europa Nostra", made a number of decisions.

It passed a resolution that legislation and administrative practice should be reviewed in each country with a view to increasing the protection given to architectural heritage, the aim of being to preserve the architectural values of the past as the common heritage of the people.

But preservation must not only cover exterior restoration; it must also bring new life to places already abandoned or no longer economically viable and give back old towns, districts and entire localities a living role in society.

The Council of Europe accordingly chose the motto "A Future for our past" for the 1975 European Architectural Heritage Year.

The Government-appointed Swiss National Committee later submitted four projects to the Council of Europe. These were: Ardez, in the Lower Engadine; Corippo, in the Verzasca Valley of Canton Ticino; Murten, in Canton Fribourg and Octodurus/Martigny in the Lower Valais. At the same time Switzerland's cantons and communes were called upon to play their part.

Ardez – a living farming village

Ardez (4,780ft.) is located a few kilometres above Schuls and has 326 inhabitants. Statistics reveal a considerable population drop – there were 541 inhabitants in 1950 and still 489 in 1970 – while the proportion of old people in the remaining community is large.

Of the 148 houses in the village, 13 are empty. In the long run this trend can be halted only by means of various measures such as improving agriculture, preserving the village's appearance, looking after the buildings of historic value and developing the commune for a reasonable amount of family tourism.

Ardez is one of the few characteristic Engadine clustered villages with many 16th and 17th century solid, generously-proportioned houses. Unlike many other places in the valley, Ardez has had no major fires since the Austrians invaded the Engadine in 1622.

Spread out beneath Steinsberg Castle with its towering keep, the village looks very much the same as it did centuries ago. Standing cheek-by-jowl

along the main street, the Engadine-style houses have wide entrances, thick walls and small windows. The facades are richly decorated with murals or graffiti.

The main threat to this unique village scene is neglect, because the cost of restoration is very high. The most urgent task is still the construction of a by-pass road on which work is due to start.

Empty or little-used houses could be used for a quiet family tourism trade that could be developed. But large-scale tourism is not wanted. The locals want their village to remain a living rural community and – most important of all – an attractive place for its own people.

Trying to revitalise Corippo

Corippo is a picturesque village, built on a steep slope in the central Verzasca Valley. Far below, the Verzasca winds its way through rock formation and the new artificial lake is reminiscent of a fjord.

Motorists making for the village from Locarno at the height of the holiday season will do better to leave their vehicles on the valley road and go up by foot, because there is hardly room to turn a car in the tiny village square.

Corippo (1,750ft.) has its own post office and a single shop to serve its 50 inhabitants, who include ten children. It also has an inn with a wonderful view from its terrace and a few rooms for visitors. A communal washing machine has replaced the village fountain once traditionally used in Ticino for doing the washing. The village church dates from 1794.

The village was built without lanes or streets. It only has paths, broken up by stone steps. They lead up and down and round, so that the visitor is automatically led back to the village square.

Like many Ticino mountain villages, Corippo consists of houses with quarry-stone walls, stone slab roofs and wooden porches. They are typical houses of their kind, with only one room on each floor and tiny windows which even in fine weather let very little light and air into the rooms with their walls 50 to 60 centimetres thick. Formerly there was only farming here. Now it is only a sideline, along with goat and sheep breeding, and the inhabitants earn their livelihoods in and around Locarno.

Corippo is still a unified community. The biggest problem is how to make the old, crumbling houses habitable.



The village church in Corippo in the Verzasca valley, Ticino, dates from 1794.

If the village is to be conserved, no new houses should be built. Instead, everything possible should be done to preserve the traditional living quarters, provided with the necessary facilities, for the inhabitants. At the same time the infra-structure would have to be adapted, services improved and a new economic basis created.

For the Ticino village must not become a "living museum". Practical proposals have long since been worked out in a plan. Now it is hoped that through special efforts as part of the European Architectural Heritage Year, the example of Corippo will show what feasible action can be taken.

Murten – Preserving medieval character

The little town of Murten, in Canton Fribourg, is built on a slight rise, surrounded by idyllic countryside. Situated on the linguistic dividing line, it forms a gateway from German-speaking to French-speaking Switzerland. With its massive castle, its many-towered walls, picturesque streets, friendly arcades and lake, Murten is a magnet for many visitors.

But Murten is also one of the most impressive examples of early urban settlement still remaining from among the more than 170 fortified medieval settlements which once existed in Switzerland.

Nowhere else are the late medieval defensive constructions so completely preserved as at Murten, where there are still several hundred yards of town wall and about a dozen fortification towers. So complete restoration of the fortifications, which in their present form date back to 1480, heads the lists of measures being started in 1975 and due to be finished in 1976, in time for the celebrations marking the 500th anniversary of the Battle of Murten.

It is also intended to make them accessible to the public throughout. Other measures are paving the lanes in the old part of the town and restoring the municipal mill which dates from the 16th century.

The house was still occupied by a miller up to 30 years ago and the mill itself was still in use during the last war. Today it stands neglected and it is planned to open a historical museum in it.

The town centre is already banned to cars and it is intended to exclude all private traffic from the old town without harming business. It is also planned to make it easier for tourists to find sights of historical interest by signposting a circuit of the town and placing inscriptions on particular buildings.

Octodurus – Martigny's Roman town

Two thousand years ago there was a Celtic settlement where the town of Martigny now stands on a bend of the River Rhone in the Lower Valais. As the Roman Empire spread north of the Alps the Great St. Bernard Pass gained in strategic importance and under Emperor



About a dozen of the old watchtowers around the circular wall are still preserved at Murten (Morat), Canton Fribourg.

Augustus the Valais was made a Roman Province. Octodurus (Forum Claudii Vallensium) must have been very large, to judge from the amphitheatre, which could accommodate at least 6,000 people, the portico-flanked forum (trading and market place measuring 100 x 71 yards), the temples, basilica and the baths.

Archaeological excavations were started in 1884 and valuable works of art were found, some of which are on view in

the Valeria Museum at Sion. Only fragmentarily excavated, the remains are in a bad structural state although they are of national importance as a document of cultural history. But the urgent requirement for Octodurus is access to this irreplaceable heritage. It is not simply a question of safeguarding and restoring the excavated remains and of stimulating continuous and systematic research and excavation; far more difficult are the planning questions and the problems of legally protecting the site.



This important but partly unexplored Roman settlement is Octodurus near Martigny, Lower Valais.