

Maurizio Cesprini, Ken Marquardt

The Canova Association: “Historical Continuation” and the Rebirth of Two Northern Italian Villages

Asociación Canova: La “continuación histórica” y el resurgimiento de dos pueblos del Norte de Italia

A Associação Canova: “Continuação Histórica” e o Renascimento de Duas Aldeias do Norte de Itália

Abstract | Resumen | Resumo

The Canova Association is an international non-profit organization founded in 2001 in the medieval village of Canova, in Oira di Crevoladossola (Verbano-Cusio-Ossola, Italy). The main purpose and the goal of the association are the re-evaluation of local stone architecture and raising awareness and appreciation of its importance, all of it through educational, cultural and artistic events and activities. During these years, Maurizio Cesprini and Ken Marquardt have witnessed the gradual transformation of this historic enclave into a habitable environment following the teachings of the local building tradition.

La Asociación Canova es una organización internacional sin ánimo de lucro fundada en 2001 en el pueblo medieval de Canova, Oira di Crevoladossola (Verbano-Cusio-Ossola, Italia). El principal propósito y el objetivo de la asociación es reevaluar la arquitectura de piedra local, sensibilizar sobre ella y contribuir a que se aprecie su importancia, todo ello a través de eventos y actividades educativas, culturales y artísticas. Durante estos años, Maurizio Cesprini y Ken Marquardt han presenciado la transformación gradual de este enclave histórico en un entorno habitable siguiendo las enseñanzas de la construcción tradicional local.

A Associação Canova é uma organização internacional sem fins lucrativos fundada em 2001 na vila medieval de Canova, em Oira di Crevoladossola (Verbano-Cusio-Ossola, Itália). O principal propósito e objetivo da associação é a reavaliação da arquitetura de pedra local e a sensibilização e valorização da sua importância através de eventos e atividades educativas, culturais e artísticas. Durante estes anos, Maurizio Cesprini e Ken Marquardt testemunharam a transformação gradual deste enclave histórico num ambiente habitável, seguindo os ensinamentos da tradição de construção local.

In 1989 Ken Marquardt, his wife Kali and his two daughters moved to the Ossola Valley, in Piemonte, Italy. They bought a four hundred year old stone house in the abandoned village of Canova and restored it. This was the beginning of what turned out to be a life's work for them, restoring ten houses in the village with other friends who slowly joined them. In 2001, after discovering the immense heritage of the abandoned villages in the valley, we founded, along with six others, an international non-profit organisation, the Canova Association. Motivated by the conviction that traditional stone constructions can offer adequate -if not superior- models for sustainable dwelling solutions, revitalizing European traditions of stone architecture became our mission.

Having entered the world of restoration "through the back door", without any formal training or academic perspective, the only principle guiding us was a feeling of awe and respect for the extraordinary Medieval structures we were working with. Only after years of work, and having completed several houses, we became aware of formal Historic Preservation practices. It was an exciting community to discover and to be part of but, to this day, we feel Historic Continuation is a term which better describes our work.

In the first year of the Canova Association we created the "Canova International Architects Encounter", which over the past twenty years has welcomed more than sixty world-renowned architects. They have been yearly hosted in the village of Canova.

It was on one of these occasions, in the company of Gustavo Aaroz, President of ICOMOS at that time, while touring Canova village, that we were informed that much of our work would not be considered appropriate for many. This was because various examples of the interventions we had carried out throughout the years, such as the addition of a window on a 16th century tower, were indistinguishable from the original construction. We learned a lot that day, and perhaps the group did as well. When we took them over to a nearby house and asked if they could date the building, they just couldn't. The house had been built by the grandfather of its present inhabitants in 1940, a fact that led to some interesting conversations. Although the terms Historic Preservation and Historic Continuation may seem to have much in common, in practice there is a significant difference.

Across the river that runs through Canova there is a tiny village called Ghesc, that had been abandoned for over one hundred years. Having largely completed the restoration of Canova, Ken and his wife often dreamed of seeing Ghesc one day brought back to life.

1 and 2: Before and after the restoration of Ken and Kali's house in Canova, Ossola Valley, Piemonte (Ken Marquardt)

3: View of Canova (Ken Marquardt)





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1 and 2: Images of two “Canova International Architects Encounters” (Ken Marquardt)

In July 2007, two young members of the Canova Association, Maurizio Cesprini and Paola Gardin, enthusiastically embraced the idea and purchased one of the houses, the Casa Alfio, bringing to an end decades of abandonment. After restoring the house, almost entirely by themselves, they moved into it and relatively shortly thereafter life was literally breathed back into the village with the birth of little Emil, who is now two years old. Paola, who had finished her studies and opened her historic preservation architecture studio, and Maurizio, who had for years led the Canova Association’s international field schools, were now qualified and ready to fully dedicate themselves to the development of what had become Canova’s primary focus: “The Ghesc Village Laboratory”.

While contemplating the reuse of these buildings, we were immediately confronted with numerous possible approaches. The obvious and over-rated “museum solution” or any speculative approach to the property were unanimously excluded. After seventeen years of experience and experimentation, we opted for a slow rebuilding in the original style, using traditional materials and techniques. We were aware, of course, that this approach could be interpreted by many as an unauthentic revisitation of the past.

Having decided that the best way to guarantee the survival of the village in the future would be to create a self-sustaining “Village Laboratory”, where traditional construction techniques could be experienced, the Association began purchasing the central group of buildings. Friends who were attracted to the project joined us by acquiring the other surrounding buildings with the intention of restoring them as private homes.

1: Maurizio, Paola and Emil (Arnaldo Abba Legnazzi)
2: Orthophoto of the village of Ghesc in 2018 (Stefano Perri)



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The first concrete restoration project was the Casa Alfio, which remains today the only inhabited house in Ghesc. The intervention, in line with the founding ideas of the entire project, was carried out by looking for the best compromise between environmental sustainability, economy, and practical design constraints.

The basic structure dates back to the 16th century. When Paola and Maurizio purchased the building, it was really nothing more than an open cavity with four walls covered with vegetation and a roof that needed to be rebuilt. Originally built as a private home, the building had been subjected to various transformations over the centuries, being used as a stable or storage space. Since the 1960s it had been completely abandoned.

People often ask us how our approach to renovation can be compared to new construction in terms of costs. The Ghesc project represented an opportunity for an in-depth analysis of this issue. The recuperation of materials which could be found directly on site or in the neighbouring area (for example: planking for floors, stones for walls and lintels, sheep's wool for thermal insulation) was the preferred choice. Lime plasters were laid over existing masonry, resulting in softer and more luminous surfaces. The inclusion of new elements such as the kitchen and the staircase, although they did not refer to the local tradition's architectural lexicon, were not in contrast but enhanced the qualities of the existing structure. As a heating solution we opted for a low-tech approach using a biomass system, limiting the insulation to ceilings and floors, and exploiting the thermal inertia of the stone walls and maintaining maximum breathability.

The house was, of course, designed for a simple and essential lifestyle. This was a fundamental element to be able to consider the home a truly sustainable model.

In 2015 Casa Alfio received a special recognition from the jury of the prestigious international award "Constructive Alps".

1: Maurizio and Paola's house before the restoration

2: Ghesc before restoration in 2008

3: Ghesc after the restoration of Maurizio and Paola's house and other restoration workshops

4: Interior of the Maurizio and Paola's house after its restoration (Maurizio Cesprini)



The reconstruction of Casa Alfio, which Paola and Maurizio carried out from 2008 until 2012, served for the preparation for what was to become the first concrete step toward the realisation of The Ghesc Village Laboratory.

Upon completion of Casa Alfio, Paola and Maurizio began organising Canova's two and three-week summer workshops. The value of the workshops' experience lies not only in the purely technical aspects of recovering and transmitting traditional stone construction techniques, but also in the social component involved in the teamwork they imply. Educational activities are structured around small reconstruction projects, such as building a portal with a relieving arch, a double-face wall, or a barrel vault.

The long term goal is to create a comfortable, fully equipped facility to support teaching activities. The recovery is being addressed gradually, using sustainable materials which are compatible with the existing structures. We have found that each building must be evaluated on an individual basis and that its adaptation is always a delicate balance between conserving existing qualities and character and incorporating the necessary changes to fulfil building code requirements.

In addition to the practical workshops, other courses involving more theoretical topics are delivered, such as the collaboration with the ABC Department of the Politecnico di Milano, which allowed the creation of a permanent laboratory, called "Laboratory of Places", specifically aimed at teaching survey techniques with laser scanners and photogrammetry. Now in its fourth edition, it has allowed the drafting of a geo-referenced topographic network and the development of a 3D survey of the entire village.

Another area of research, addressed in a collaboration with Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (DIST) of the Politecnico di Torino, is dedicated to the study of the thermal dispersion of stone masonry subjected to winter conditions through the application of contact thermo-flowmeters.

1 to 4: Images of diverse workshops
(Maurizio Cesprini)





1 and 2: Activities to create a georeferenced topographic network and a 3D survey of the entire village (Maurizio Cesprini)
3: View of Ghesc (Maurizio Cesprini)

Hosting students from all over the world guarantees a continuous flow of ideas and energy that gives strength and lifeblood to the Association while offering a rich immersion in local tradition to the participants.

Other recent collaborations have been implemented with institutions such as the Willowbank School of Restoration Arts from Queenston, Ontario; the University of North Carolina; the Yestermorrow Design-Build School, Vermont; the University of Oregon; the Spring Hill College from Bologna; the Politecnico di Milano; the Politecnico di Torino; the Università degli Studi di Milano Statale; and La Sapienza-Università di Roma.

Conclusion

The lessons learned are many.

One is that it is healthy and wise to move slowly.

Another is that passion and respect are far more important than money.

But perhaps the most important one is that each of us are simply custodians. We are “passers-by” among countless others who, over the centuries, have found shelter, joy, and sorrow, within the same centuries-old stone walls.

Biographies | Biografías | Biografias

Maurizio Cesprini

He graduated in 2006 from the Università degli Studi di Milano Statale at the Department of Cultural and Environmental Heritage, where he is currently an adjunct professor in the degree course in Environmental and Territorial Human Sciences. For thirteen years he has acted as Lead Coordinator and instructor of the Canova Association's international field school program in collaboration with a number of Italian and foreign universities. He is one of the promoters of the Ghesc Village Laboratory and dedicates the majority of his time to the study and transmission of traditional construction techniques through direct empirical learning on site.

Ken Marquardt

He is the founder and current president of the Canova Association, an international non-profit organization created in February 2001 with its headquarters in the Ossola Valley, Piemonte, Italy. His approach to restoration emphasises Historic Continuation and Revitalisation, more than Preservation. Since 1989 Ken has been responsible for the restoration of numerous rural stone houses in the Ossola Valley and beyond, ten of which are in the village of Canova. He has developed an extensive program of international and Italian field schools dedicated to learning the craft of stonework in collaboration with the Canova Association and the local community.