

House Types of Italian Rhaetia

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House Types of Italian Rhaetia

A Journey through a Lesser-Known Alpine Architecture

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Alla terra in cui sono nato e alla quale devo ciò che sono oggi.

John of Salisbury attributed to Bernard of Chartres the famous aphorism "we are dwarfs standing on the shoulder of giants".

Today there are probably no dwarfs or giants anymore, but certainly we stand on someone else's shoulder. For my research it has been precious the help of Giovanna Battistessa, Alberto Benini, Eugenio Bernasconi, Stefania Bossi, Franca Prandi, Armando Ruinelli, Paola Salis and Fondazione Creval. I would like also to thank Mauro De Giovanni for providing me the drawings of Tenuta La Gatta, as well as Foppoli Moretta e Associati and Archigem Guiducci e Mercandelli Architetti Associati for the survey of Palazzetto Besta. A special mention goes to Francesca Bormetti, whose friendliness and vast knowledge have greatly contributed to the development of my work. I would like also to thank professor Luca Ortelli for giving me the opportunity of tackling this topic, as well as for his constant guide throughout the semester.

My warmest gratitude and love go to my parents, Eros and Nadia, for giving me an opportunity they never had.

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Preface

The analysis of the architecture of Italian Rhaetia is primarily an exercise in abstraction. Trying to limit a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, such as alpine architecture, to a geographically limited area, is undoubtedly an assumption of partiality and incompleteness. Nevertheless, it is not possible to do otherwise: the only alternative would be to carry out an encyclopaedic and universal research, which would be too dispersive.

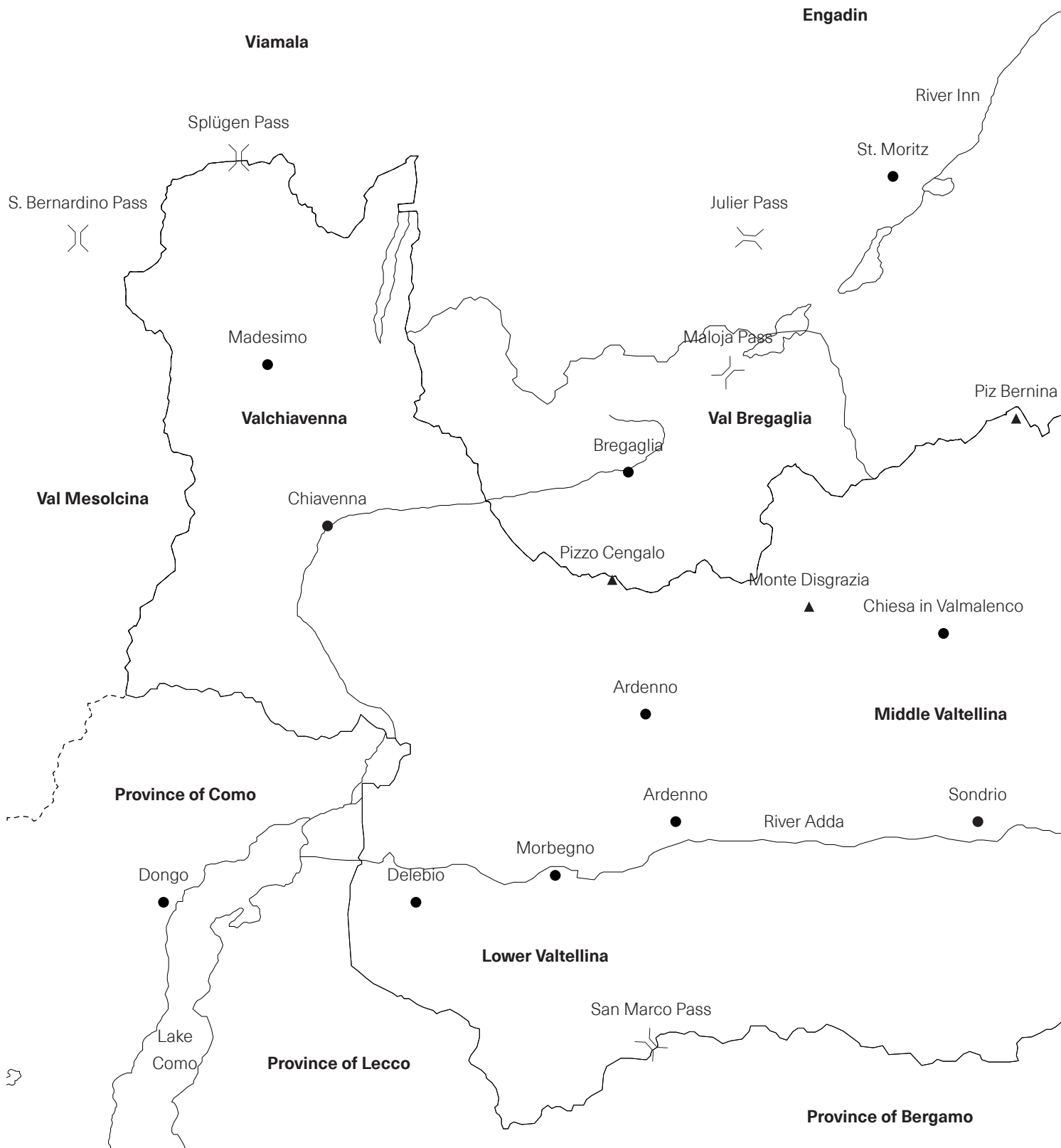
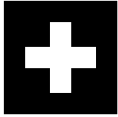
The aim of the present work is in fact to try to understand the most important historical examples of domestic construction in Valtellina, Valchiavenna, Val Bregaglia and Val Poschiavo, as well as the different ways of living that have developed in the area. Two are the major objectives that I wanted to pursue and both are referred in first place to me. The first and main one, it is to provide an architectural résumé of domestic examples, in order to eventually develop a project in a more coherent and conscious way. The second, it is to deepen the relationship between history and architectural forms through a description that, in its type of expression and content, however limited, has never been realised. In this sense I follow the idea of Giorgio Grassi, who stated that "describing an architecture means (...) mainly to refer to the historical observation"¹. In almost all the researches on the topic on the contrary, rural and grand houses were treated as phenomena in themselves, as if there was no connection between them whatsoever. Margherita Azzi Visenti wisely remembers that "the rural house is crucial to understand the development towards the palace and the villa"² and for this reason the mansion of the Renaissance and Baroque will be introduced by the study of medieval dwellings and fortifications. Every analysis in the present work is supported by a graphic content of drawings only. Through the process of redrawing I have understood the characteristics of a building better than I would have done by simply looking at pictures. Plans and sections are the basic tools of architecture and I have been surprised to find so many books on the topic without a single drawing. Moreover, the simplicity and abstraction of the lines grant a

better comparability of the buildings.

The last element worth clarifying is the choice of the English language: it is not a pure whim of the author, who would have preferred to write in his mother tongue or in one of the Swiss national languages, but the result of an explicit desire to spread the knowledge of Italian Rhaetia outside the regional circle to which it has remained confined until now. While the German and Romansh-speaking parts of the Canton of Grisons have enjoyed an explosion in popularity and interest from architects all over the world, thanks in part to well-established professionals working in the area, the southern valleys have so far been studied by local experts only. The situation is somehow even worse in Valtellina and Valchiavenna, where all the publications available on the topic are the work of the very same group of experts. Even the undersigned, and many of my fellow countrymen, had no idea of the richness in diversity and architectural expression that Italian Rhaetia has been able to express. Too much clouded by the proximity of major centres, it is a common tendency to ignore what we have closest to us, geographically and culturally. It is precisely in the perspective of rediscovery of my own land that the idea of this research was born, which then developed progressively on its own as the investigation continued.

1 Margherita Azzi Visentini, *La Villa in Italia. Quattrocento e Cinquecento* (Milan: Electa, 1995), 39-40.

2 Giorgio Grassi, *La Costruzione Logica dell'Architettura* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1967), 188.





Introduction

A Renewed Interest for the Alps

Nowadays, the Alps are more and more subject of interest for the architects. After the indifference and speculation of the 70s and 80s, whose consequences are still visible in famous localities like Breuil-Cervinia and St. Moritz, not only the experts but also common people have understood that the metropolitan typologies cannot be applied to rural and mountainous environments. The consequent step has been the research of an efficient, well-integrated and aesthetically appealing architecture for the Alps. This quest started from the study of the local historical examples: both in Italy and in Switzerland, architects and historians alike have produced relevant pieces of literature and architectural critic, but despite the growing wave of interest some areas have been partially overlooked. The area of Italian Rhaetia, divided between Switzerland and Italy, is one on those neglected areas, due to both its marginal position in the relative country and the scarcity of important buildings compared to the neighbouring regions.

Historical Notes

As said, the two countries in question are Switzerland and Italy (fig. 1). Having a look at a map, there is no indication of Italian Rhaetia whatsoever and even its very inhabitants often ignore such a definition; nonetheless, the region of Rhaetia is very old has its roots in the subdivision of the Roman Empire. Rhaetia was in fact a province named after the tribes living in the area of central and eastern Alps: in the Low Middle Ages a part of it saw the birth of the Grisons, an alliance of three leagues that wanted to maintain their independence from the Holy Roman Empire. If one had to find a starting point for the history of Italian Rhaetia, that would be the invasion of Valtellina and Valchiavenna by the Three Leagues in 1512¹. Valtellina and Valchiavenna are two valleys on the southern side of the Alps, neighbouring with the Grisons (fig. 2); unlike them, their territory is fruitful and fertile. Until then, they had been ruled mainly by the Duchy of Milan,



Fig. 1 - The Swiss Confederation and the Italian Republic

whose influx was strong especially on religious matters. For almost three centuries, the Grisons, Valtellina and Valchiavenna constituted a small political entity more or less independent from the main actors of the time (the mentioned Holy Roman Empire, the Duchy of Milan and the Papacy above all) and developed a common culture whose signs can be still observed today. From 1797², Valtellina and Valchiavenna became part of the Cisalpine Republic, abandoning their long-term rulers, who shortly after joined the Swiss Confederation, and turning their gaze on the Italian peninsula. To the present day, they form one of the 12 provinces of Lombardy (fig. 2), with Sondrio as a

1 Florian Hitz et al., "Grigioni," in *Dizionario Storico della Svizzera* (DSS).

2 Ibid.

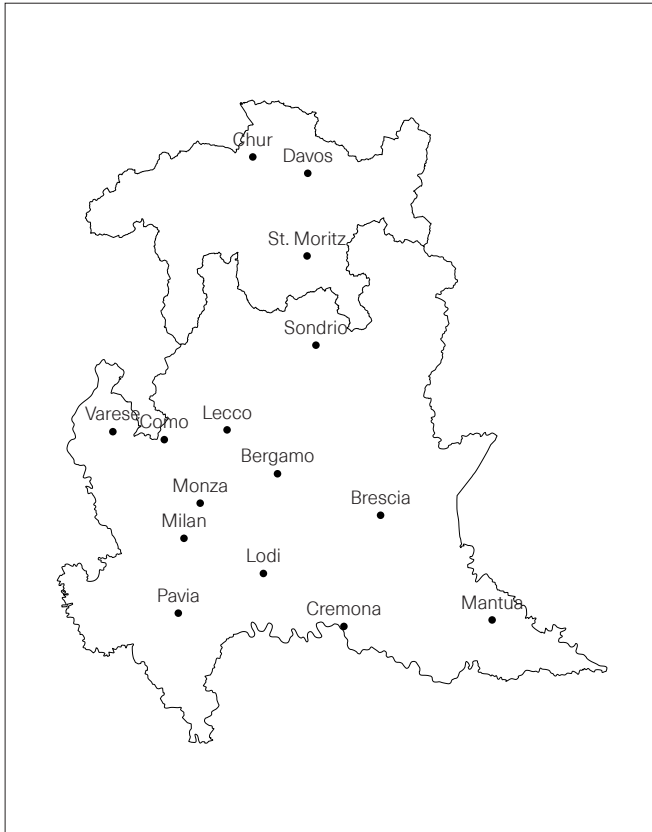


Fig. 2 - The Canton of Grisons and the Region of Lombardy

third-order capital.

Culture and Language

Once explained the meaning of Rhaetia, it is time to understand why it is defined as Italian. Being part of the Roman Empire, in the province of Rhaetia Latin was widely spoken and gave origin to two distinct languages that still exist nowadays: the Lombard and the Romansh idioms. At the beginning of the 16th century, the prevalence of the Romansh language in the Grisons had already started to diminish in favour of the German spoken by the

Walser settlers coming from west³ as well as from the Alemanic groups of the north. Within this complex panorama, in four valleys of the south (Val Mesolcina, Val Calanca, Val Poschiavo and Val Bregaglia) Lombard was almost exclusively spoken⁴. It is important to remark that the Italian language, as we know it today, did not exist yet. The conquest of Valtellina and Valchiavenna added another important part of Lombard speakers to the Grison population: beside the common language, the ties between Val Bregaglia, Val Poschiavo and the newly annexed territories were strengthened by their proximity and the belonging to the watershed of the Mediterranean. For the population of the southern valleys was in fact more difficult to reach their capital, Chur, than it was to reach Milan, since the Alps still formed a dangerous barrier that the passes had not yet completely subjugated. Nowadays, Italian is the official language on either side of the border, even though Lombard is still spoken on everyday basis. The term Italian Rhaetia refers to the four valleys of Poschiavo, Bregaglia, Sondrio and Chiavenna that, despite the lack of political unity, still share a common culture that try to promote through a series of initiatives⁵.

Territory

The entire territory of Italian Rhaetia is mountainous. It is delimited on the west side by the Lepontine Alps and on the southern side by the Orobic Alps, while the rest is occupied by the Rhaetian Alps, among which stands out the easternmost four-thousand peak of the alpine range, Piz Bernina. The whole territory, beside small fragments, is situated on the Mediterranean watershed: the waters of the Mera creek, going through Val Bregaglia and Valchiavenna, flow into Lake Como: so does also the Adda river, after having received its tributary Poschiavino, coming from Val Poschiavo. Of the four valleys, two are north-south oriented (Val Chiavenna and Val Poschiavo) and two are east-west oriented (Valtellina and Val Bregaglia). The altitude of the territo-

3 Max Gschwend, *La Casa Rurale nel Canton Ticino. Volume I*, trans. Sandro Bianconi (Basel: G. Krebs, 1976), 33.

4 Florian Hitz et al., "Grigioni," in *Dizionario Storico della Svizzera (DSS)*.

5 Fondo Europeo di Sviluppo Regionale Italia-Svizzera. "I Territori."

ry is very differentiated, so are the agricultural activities and the natural resources. Until the end of the 19th century, the population of Valtellina and Valchiavenna had the higher percentage of farmers in Italy⁶: the most common crops were rye, corn, wheat, barley, millet, while in some areas of Valfurva also potatoes and linen were cultivated⁷. The area of Lower and Middle Valtellina is mostly known for its strong wines, whose grapes are locally



Fig. 3 - The Village of Ávero in Val San Giacomo and of Sostila in Val Fabiolo

called *chiavennasca* and are grown on drystone terraces up to 800 metres above sea level. As far as breeding is concerned, sheep had a predominant role over cattle. In particular, breeding was important for settlements located at a higher altitude, where no agriculture could be carried on.

Settlements in Valtellina and Valchiavenna

In Valtellina the Rhaetian side, exposed to the south, hosts numerous settlements situated on the hillside, between the terraced vineyards in a lower position and the woods and pas-

tures higher up. It must be recalled the fact that the valley floor was marshland, whose operation of drainage was completely achieved only in the 19th century by will of the Austrian government. The Orobian side, on the other hand, is more impervious and cold because it faces north and is characterised by thick forests, without many opportunities for a successful settlement. There are nonetheless examples of villages of medieval origin



Fig. 4 - The Village of Savogno in Val Bregaglia

on this side too, such as Sostila in Val Fabiolo (fig. 3)⁸, that was still inhabited until last century. As we will see, the architecture of the rural house has learned to adapt to each of the two sides. The basic types of each settlement are in any case always the same: dwelling, stable and barn. The buildings with housing function were usually separated from those with agricultural functions. The first nucleus of a village was often formed by individual units located near the land owned by a particular family, around which close and less close relatives began to build their habitations. These first embryos of urbanisation are called

6 Dario Benetti, "A Confini tra le Diverse Culture: le Tipologie delle Dimore Rurali in Valtellina e Valchiavenna," 307.

7 Benetti, *Il Segno dell'Uomo nel Paesaggio: Società e Ambiente di Valtellina e Valchiavenna*, 69.

8 Dario Benetti, *Dimore Rurali Medievali del Versante Orobianco Valtellinese* (Sondrio: Cooperativa Editoriale Quaderni Valtellinesi, 2009), 219.

*patronymic districts*⁹. Still nowadays some localities are named after the families who inhabited them. From the aggregation of many districts, the first villages eventually arose, within which the different family groups can still be distinguished through their surnames. In some cases the fields were shared among the different members of the village, as well as the use of fountains or ovens was open to everyone belonging to the local community. The presence of a water spring, both as an energy source and as a resource in itself, was one of the criterion for the success of a settlement. Eventually, barns and stables started to be built also outside the village to exploit other pastures, especially when in summer cattle and sheep were brought at higher altitudes for two months.

Settlements in Val Bregaglia and Val Poschiavo

In Val Bregaglia and Val Poschiavo the settlements are strongly influenced by the routes leading to two major passes, respectively the Maloja and the Bernina Pass, as shown by the case of Savogno (fig. 4). On the valley floor the buildings are mainly organised perpendicularly to the mountain side¹⁰, with the shorter side and the main entrance overlooking the road. This orientation can be found in medieval buildings as well as in renaissance ones (see chapter *Dwelling*). Different organisation is found on the mountain and in the alpine pastures, where the buildings are scattered on the territory or organised according to *patronymic districts* like in Valtellina. In Val Poschiavo the building typology of the villages is similar to that of higher altitudes, meaning that dwelling and barn coexist under the same roof. In Val Bregaglia, on the contrary, the mountain and the pastures are characterised by barns and stables separated from rural dwellings¹¹, while the unitary model is found exclusively on the valley floor. Despite the geographical belonging to Valtellina, the former County of Bormio has characteristics similar to those of Engadin and Val Poschiavo, in first place the prevalence of

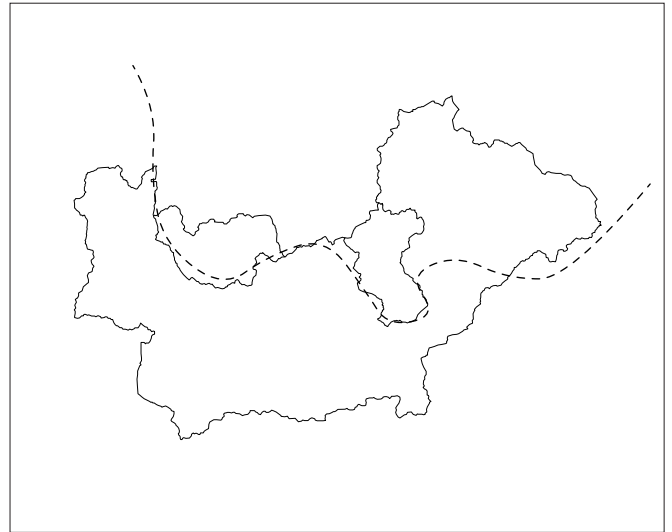


Fig. 5 - The Limit of Diffusion of the Unitary Model

the unitary model (fig. 5). The village of Livigno for example, is articulated along the road that connects it with Bormio and Poschiavo, while on the mountain side can be found isolated barns for the exploitation of the grazing lands.

9 Benetti, *Il Segno dell'Uomo nel Paesaggio: Società e Ambiente di Valtellina e Valchiavenna*, 84.

10 Diego Giovanoli, *Facevano Case. 1450-1950* (Malans/Coira: Pro Grigioni Italiano, 2009), 91.

11 Ibid., 175.

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Walls

Materials

Before the advent of concrete and glass as building materials, the European architectural culture was heavily characterised by the use of wood and stone. The prevalence of one of the two materials in the medieval period was due to a series of local and environmental factors but can be roughly simplified in the form of a map according to which at lower latitudes the use of stone was prevalent while at higher latitudes wood was more important. The map¹ (fig. 6) is not intended to indicate an exclusive use of one of the two materials in the areas indicated: wood and stone are used in most cases in a synergistic way, exploiting the characteristics of each in its strengths. It has been also hypothesised that stone was prevalent in romance-speaking areas, while wood in Germanic-speaking ones: this tradition dates back to some observation of Ammianus Marcellinus and



Fig. 6 - The Line Roughly Dividing the Areas of Stone and Wood Predominance

were retaken in modern times by the *Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte*². Rhaetia, culturally located between Northern and Southern Europe, is also in this case in the middle of two different traditions. The Hunziker himself begins the volume of *Das Schweizerhaus* dedicated to the Grisons by describing the shift from carpentry to masonry that observed on his journey from Chur to the Engadin³. In the Italian Rhaetia on one hand there are stone constructions similar to the European examples of the time, on the other hand there are woodworking and construction techniques common to the transalpine and Northern European areas.

Masonry

Stone architecture, in Valtellina as in the rest of Europe, already flourished in medieval times. The Comacini Masters, whose influence is well attested throughout the continent, are mentioned for the first time in the Edict of Rotari of 643, in the Early Middle Ages. They originally came from the geographical area of present-day west Lombardy and Canton Ticino. Like the latter, stone masonry is an original element also in the Italian Rhaetia⁴. The use of stone in Lower and Middle Valtellina is due to the abundance of this material, recovered from the ploughing of the land. This process is locally called *roncare* and left its traces in many local names (Ronchi, Ronco, Roncaiola, Roncaglia)⁵. It started and was mostly carried on in medieval times (between the 10th and the 13th century): the debris were used to build low dry-stone walls called *murache*, which can still be seen today in the valley floor. The stone fences built in the alpine pastures are instead called *bàrech*⁶. Dry-stone construction is also typical of houses located in the high mountain, where is more difficult to prepare the mortar. In fact this technique is suitable

1 Santino Langé, *L'Héritage Roman. La Maison en Pierre d'Europe Occidentale*, trans. Anna Dal Mas (Liège: Pierre Mardaga, 1992), 8-9.

2 Jakob Hunziker, *La Maison Suisse. Troisième Partie: Les Grisons*, trans. Frédéric Broillet (Lausanne: Payot, 1906), 238.

3 Ibid., 1.

4 Gschwend, *La Casa Rurale nel Canton Ticino. Volume I*, 29.

5 Benetti, "A Confini tra le Diverse Culture: le Tipologie delle Dimore Rurali in Valtellina e Valchiavenna," 309.

6 Benetti, *Dimore Rurali Medievali del Versante Orobico Valtellinese*, 199.

for single-floor houses only, since it lacks in stability: to have a sufficient resistance, a dry-stone wall has to be at least 50 centimetres thick⁷. The way of laying the stone follows traditional techniques that have been bequeathed from generation to generation and that nowadays are recognised by Unesco as an Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Rural buildings are usually standing thanks to the perimeter walls only, while more recent instances present also inner structural walls⁸. More complex and multi-storey houses were built with mortar in order keep the same thickness but also to strengthen the construction and protect the inside from water, wind and insects.

Stone Construction

The construction of stone buildings was always entrusted to highly specialised workers, who were responsible for laying the more massive and regular cornerstones (fig. 7). The same principle was followed for defensive constructions, which had to have even greater stability (see chapter *Tower*). After the installation of the portals up to the architrave, usually in stone but sometimes also in wood, non-specialised workers took care of the infilling. The wanderings of the Comacini Masters throughout Europe meant that even today we can still find similarities in the rural architecture of very distant areas⁹. One of the common characters of the use of stone is the way of creating frames around openings in the walls, whether windows or doors. The door jambs are made of one or more elements, well rectified only on the inner side. Above them a single stone is laid, with the function of lintel: in some cases it can assume a gable or lunette shape. A thinner, longer stone was usually inserted at half of the height in order to distribute the loads more effectively on the rest of the wall. The limited dimension of the openings, especially the windows, is due to both the static qualities of stone when undergoing pulling forces and the difficulty of producing glass elements, especially of big dimensions. Glass was never-

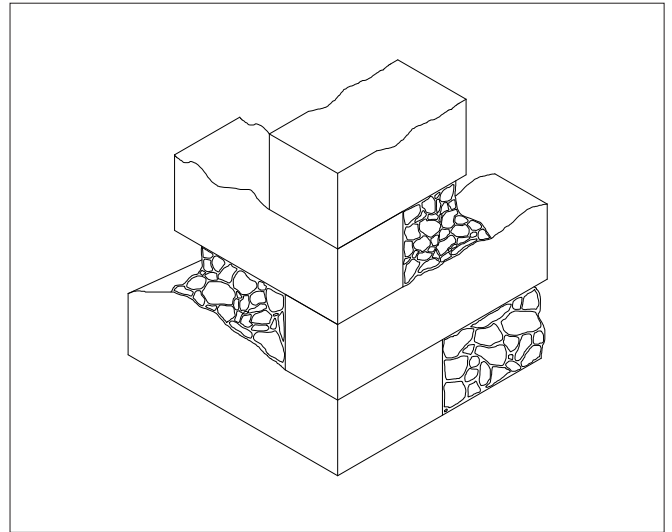


Fig. 7 - The Alternate of Disposition of the Cornerstones

theless completely absent from the dwellings of the peasants. The described way of delimiting the perimeter of the windows can be found in both civic and rural buildings, as well as in towers and castles. In the upper part of some houses it is possible to find small stone corbels protruding from the façade, which have the sole function of supporting temporary or not temporary elements, such as sticks or wooden boards. A squared or rectangular opening on top of the door was realised to evacuate the dense smoke produced within the household. The need for a constant air stream was also crucial in barns and drying rooms: for this reason the pediment of the building was often left completely open or, if not possible like in the case of horse roofs, stone pillars were built to sustain the ridge beam (fig. 10). The decline in the use of stone as a construction material is relatively recent: it is only at the beginning of the 20th century that the old techniques were abandoned, even though nowadays we assist to a reappraisal of such, mainly for summer houses located in protected areas where the regulations concerning

7 Gschwend, *La Casa Rurale nel Canton Ticino. Volume I*, 35.

8 Aurelio Benetti and Dario Benetti, *Dimore Rurali di Valtellina e Valchiavenna* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1984), 261.

9 Langé, *L'Héritage Roman. La Maison en Pierre d'Europe Occidentale*, 64.

materials and their environmental impact are very strict.

Coating

In Middle and Lower Valtellina, contrarily to the former Counties of Bormio and Chiavenna, plastered walls are the exception before the 19th century: they are usually found in buildings belonging to wealthy families, who want to show their prestige and to obtain a better insulated inside space. Some houses present just a small plastered part, sufficient to draw religious figures or writings of other sort. Mortar was in fact scarce throughout the valley, at the point that to realise big buildings it was necessary to import it from the rest of Lombardy. Plastered walls, on the contrary, are much more common in the Grisons, especially in Engadin. Single patches of stone or wood where plastered to better protect single rooms from the cold, usually sleeping rooms¹⁰. This did not happen in the southern alpine valleys. Moreover, it is in these areas that the *sgraffito* technique, very popular in Rome in the 16th century, was very much used to embellish the houses, thanks to the artists that spread around Central Europe at that time¹¹ and that had to pass through the Maloja, Splügen and Septimer Passes. Biblical themes, as well as architectural motifs were the most common decorations, together with sentences of popular wisdom. Some examples of *sgraffito* can be found also in the mentioned Bormio and Chiavenna Counties, geographically closer to the aforementioned area. In Valtellina it never became so popular because this technique remained, as it was in the rest of Italy, an exclusive of the wealthy classes. One of the most remarkable examples is in fact the façade of Palazzo Besta, that in its intentions wants to recall the rustication of Florentine palaces and has been taken as example for other *sgraffito* decorations, as it can be seen in a house in Samnaun¹².

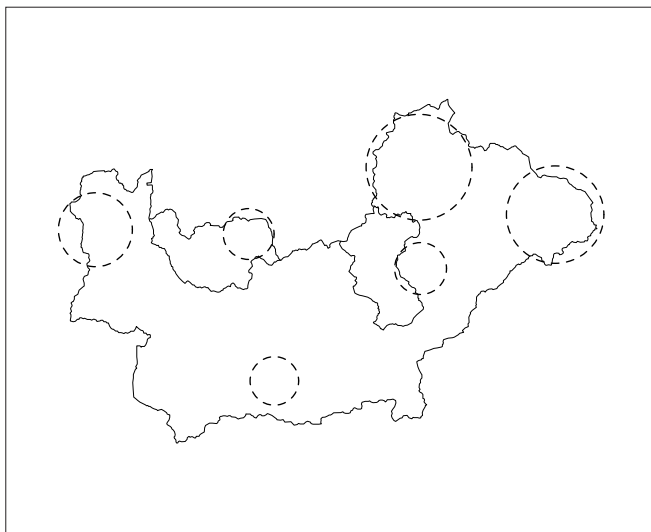


Fig. 8 - The Areas where the *Blockbau* is attested

Blockbau

The attestation of the use of wood in the Alps for construction of whatever sort dates back to the Prehistoric Age. The working techniques of this material have been preserved until the medieval period: this is the case of the *Blockbau* technique. Another theory affirms that the reprise of this method of construction happens later and must be attributed to the German-speaking Walser populations settled in the valleys of Upper Valtellina and Upper Valchiavenna. A similar phenomenon happened in the Canton of Ticino, during the Walser migrations coming from present day Valais that colonised also the upper valleys of the Canton of Grisons in the 14th century¹³. Whatever the case, the *Blockbau* is well testified in the mentioned areas, as well as in Val Tartano, Val San Giacomo and Val Bregaglia (fig. 8). It does locally assume different denominations: it is for instance called *càrden* in Valchiavenna¹⁴, expression related with the term *ca-*

10 Christoph Simonett, *Die Bauernhäuser des Kantons Graubünden. Band I* (Basel: Verlag Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Volkskunde, 1965), 19.

11 Ibid., 116.

12 Ibid., 122.

13 Gschwend, *La Casa Rurale nel Canton Ticino. Volume I*, 33.

14 Benetti, *Dimore Rurali Medievali del Versante Orobico Valtellinese*, 69.

deina (chain) used in the Canton of Ticino¹⁵. This region shares the same characteristics with the neighbouring Italian valleys: softwoods are usually used at higher altitudes, while at lower ones chestnut wood is more common¹⁶. The *Blockbau* of round beams was more suitable for barns, where a constant flow of air was needed. For house construction, the trunks were usually squared in order to better sit one on top of the other. Within *Blockbau*-built houses the heated room was called *stüa mata*, because it did not have a wooden cladding other than the structure (see chapter *Spaces*). Examples of such are almost only found in Livigno and Valchiavenna.

Wood was eventually abandoned as construction material, also due to its fire hazard, but the *stüa* typology continued to survive as a wooden clad room within the stone-constructed house. Even in stone buildings the slabs are usually made of wood, except for cellars or ground floors where stone vaults are also used. It is also possible to find mixed wood and stone slabs (fig. 17). Sometimes an originally *Blockbau* building is clad with stone and becomes the *stüa* of a bigger house, as it happened for the Ca' Bardassa in Val San Giacomo¹⁷.

Staircases

In rural buildings the circulation was exclusively external, often taking advantage of the natural slope of the terrain. This happened because of the limited dimensions of the interior spaces, that were more conveniently exploited for domestic activities than for circulation purposes. Staircases are mainly a feature of stone houses, since they more often developed on more than one storey, while *Blockbau* buildings are generally just one floor high. The area of Livigno and the typology of the *bait* constitute an exception in this sense (see chapter *Dwelling*). The most primitive system of stair is directly taken from the dry-stone terraces, where stone slabs up to 10 centimetres thick leant out of

the stonework. Applied to houses, a system of this sort grants steps up to 85 cm wide¹⁸ that are sometimes reinforced with mortar or stone supports.

15 Gschwend, *La Casa Rurale nel Canton Ticino. Volume I*, 43.

16 Benetti and Benetti, *Dimore Rurali di Valtellina e Valchiavenna*, 273.

17 Ibid., 106

18 Gschwend, *La Casa Rurale nel Canton Ticino. Volume I*, 102.

Roofs

Materials

The roof is a crucial element for the protection of buildings. Its conformation and construction is closely linked to the type of wall and the geographical location of the building. When talking about the shape of the roof, a distinction must be made between rural and stately homes. Most of the former have a double-pitched roof, regardless of the material; it is not uncommon to come across single-pitched roofs. Pediments are usually facing the valley. The pavilion and the semi-pavilion roof, on the other hand, were introduced in the Renaissance with stately homes and palaces and only from the 19th century onwards they were also used for rural dwellings¹. The pavilion roof required in fact a difficult and precise construction that only wealthy people could afford.

The roof structure is exclusively out of wood, especially chestnut and larch, capable of resisting to important stress forces, while the coverings are mainly made of stone. Roofing in the Italian Rhaetia is, generally speaking, less varied than in the Canton of Ticino, as it is less open to the influences of the Po Valley. In both areas stone roofing is the most common, whatever the prestige of the house, and it is found on stone masonry buildings and as well as on *Blockbau* ones. It consists of *piode*, a local term to indicate gneiss sheets up to 10 centimetres thick. The important weight of this solution, around 400-500 kilograms for a 1 square metre roof², requires a solid wall construction. The construction of this kind of roof starts from the base: each slab rests on top of the previous one and leaves only 10 centimetres uncovered. The edges are bevelled to allow the rain to flow better. The most critical point is the ridge, where one of the two pitches must cover the other, according to a system known as the *cap*³.

Material-wise, the situation was different before the 15th century, which is a turning point both regarding housing typologies and building materials⁴. Back in the Low Middle Ages stone was not prevalent at all in roofs: until the area of Berbenno straw was widely used⁵, as some examples can be still found in the Canton of Ticino. It must be remembered that the valley floor was much different back then, since the river Adda didn't have a defined course and was creating lot of swamps full of reeds, used also for construction purposes. Wooden shingles were also common, even though today only in the Bormio area do examples of larch shingle roofs survive. Larch is an excellent building wood because it resists the weather effectively.

Structure

Trying to sum up the copious examples scattered all over the territory, the roof construction is basically carried out according to two techniques: the rafter roof and the horse roof. Both systems are used for either rural dwellings or rich mansions. Obviously, such a clear distinction is arbitrary and often one of the two techniques borrows elements from the other, giving birth to more complex and efficient structures.

The differences between the two are evident when looking at their conformation. The rafter roof (fig. 9) consists of a series of trusses which are embedded in the beam at the base of the roof and which do not have a ridge beam. The trusses are about 90 centimetres apart from each other and their slope must be important enough to reduce the lateral thrust and prevent them from coming out of the beam at the root. Three chains are often sufficient to stabilise the whole structure⁶. In order to prevent the beam to slide out of the wall it is often introduced another wooden element, called *chiave*, positioned vertically through

1 Benetti and Benetti, *Dimore Rurali di Valtellina e Valchiavenna*, 263.

2 Gschwend, *La Casa Rurale nel Canton Ticino. Volume I*, 61.

3 Ibid., 63.

4 Della Misericordia, Rao and Baruta, "Il Paesaggio Nobiliare: Castelli, Torri e Palazzi fra Medioevo ed Età Moderna."

5 Ibid.

6 Gschwend, *La Casa Rurale nel Canton Ticino. Volume I*, 72.

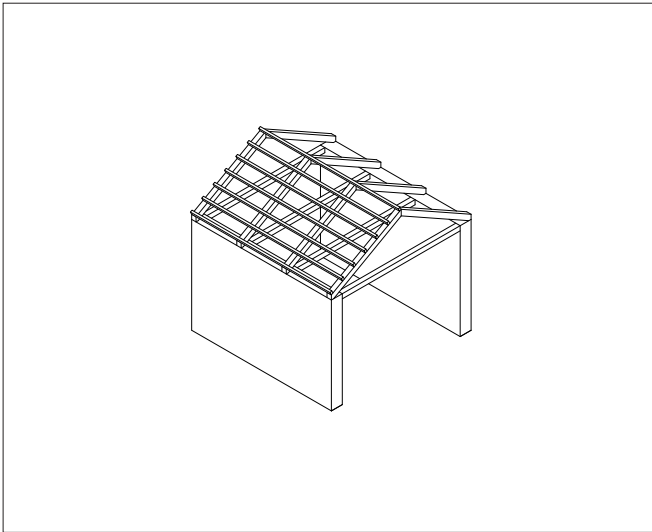


Fig. 9 - The Rafter Roof

the beam and through a hole in the masonry. From outside the rafter roof is recognisable because the main walls are perpendicular to the trusses and to the pediment of the house.

The horse roof (fig. 10), on the contrary, is not affected by the slope because it is the beams parallel to the eaves that support the roof. This type of roof is the most common, as will be seen in the examples analysed. The gradient of the roof is usually between 25 and 30 degrees, while in some cases it can reach up to 40-50 degrees⁷. Usually round section trunks, from which only the bark has been removed, are used: this also applies to the palaces, although their structure is normally more complex. Leaning perpendicularly to them are the secondary beams, which often protrude to create an eaves; in some cases they stop first and the eaves are made of the covering stones. The eaves are crucial for the protection of the wall from the weather and, if there is a gallery, for the protection of the products that are put out to dry. From outside the horse roof is recognisable because the main beams are perpendicular to the pediment, that often is left open to let the air pass through the attic in order to better dry the hay.

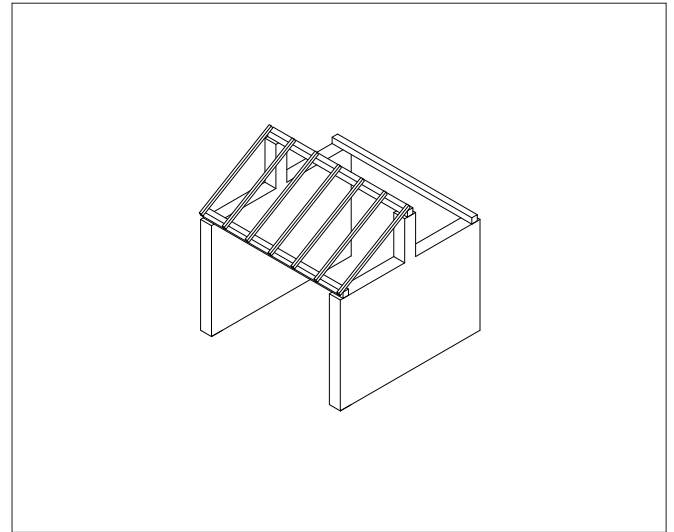


Fig. 10 - The Horse Roof

Chimneys

In the Early Middle Ages, houses didn't have an apposite exit for the smoke produced by the fireplace. Smoke was passing through the stone slabs of the roof or through the limited openings, that granted a constant flow of air and light to the inside. Lately an apposite quadrangular hole was introduced on top of the door, as well as other specific openings close to the stove. From the 15th century onwards, the area of Italian Rhaetia followed two different paths concerning the heating solutions: Lower and Middle Valtellina continued to use the archaic solution of the smoke-chamber, while Upper Valtellina, Valchiavenna and the Italian Grisons adopted the typology of the *stüa*-kitchen (see chapter *Dwelling*). The most important innovation in the latter is the installation of the flue, either located outside or implemented within the masonry, that evacuates effectively the smoke through a chimney. Every chimney was connected to a hearth only and their abundance allowed the builders to experiment in forms and dimensions. Chimneys became object of attention from the 15th century onwards, during the first renovations and realisations of family mansions according to renaiss-

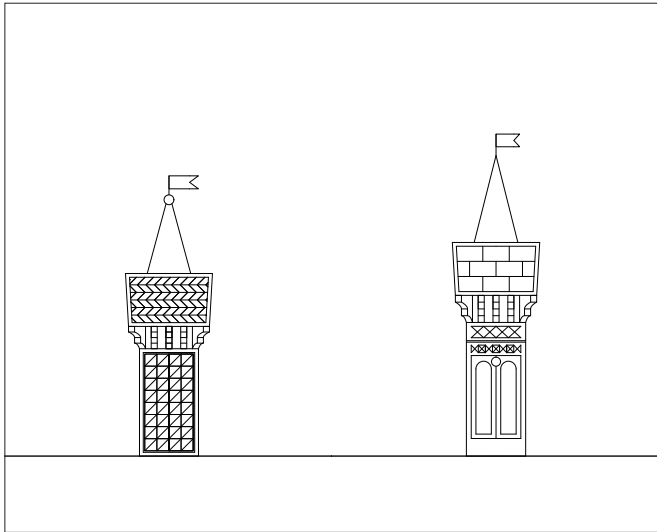


Fig. 11 - Two Chimneys of Palazzo Besta

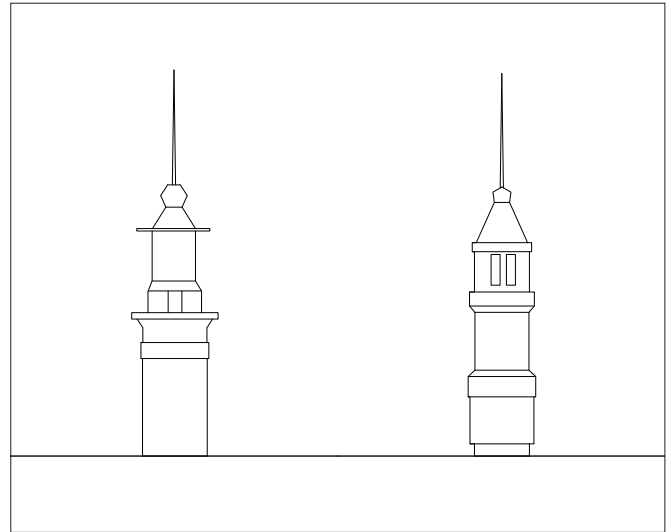


Fig. 12 - Two Chimneys of Palazzetto Besta

sance principles. It was indeed a phenomenon that spread all over Italy⁸, as the famous Villa La Ferdinanda, also known as Villa of the Hundred Chimneys, shows. The attention due to an element so little visible is clear in Palazzo Besta, where the sgraffito decorations of the façade are repeated on the chimneys (fig. 11). Mushroom-like and tower-like chimneys of this sort are a typical feature of Valtellina⁹ and became part of a local vocabulary that the noble families were drawing on to embellish their residences. By analysing the differences in style between the palaces, located in hamlets or towns, and the villas, usually enjoying the quiet of the countryside, it emerges a higher level of refinement of the chimneys located in a urban environment. The diversification of treatment is evident for example in the comparison between Palazzo and Palazzetto Besta (fig. 12), whose architectural characteristics will be later analysed. Such a distinction would make sense since the chimneys of civic palaces could be observed from the other houses and had a function of representation comparable to that of the façade, with which they

share in fact the outer treatment. Other remarkable examples can be found in Palazzo Parravicini in Villa di Tirano and Palazzo Homodei Marinoni in Tirano¹⁰. The countryside residences, on the other hand, were most of the time inhabited during the summertime only, and would not require a high level of detail on a secondary element like that of the chimney, being the façade itself extremely plain and sober. Palazzo Vertemate Franchi is a clear example of this attitude of the Rhaetian aristocracy.

8 Azzi Visentini, *La Villa in Italia. Quattrocento e Cinquecento*, 10.

9 Renzo Sertoli Salis, "Il Palazzetto Besta di Bianzone," *Bollettino della Società Storica Valtellinese*, no. 17 (1963-64): 7.

10 Urbano Beti et al., *Palazzi Signorili nella Rezia Italiana. Volume 2* (Sondrio: Edizioni World Images, 2019), 216.

Openings

Windows as Elements of Innovation

The window is the element that has seen the major improvements throughout time, to the point that its characteristics have been often used as parameters for the dating of a building¹. Unlike nowadays, its design was mostly conditioned by the climate and by constructive solutions. Just like the rest of the house, also the windows are characterised by the stone-wood duality, only exception being the case of *Blockbau* buildings, where both the jamb and the frame are out of wood. Nevertheless, most of the case studies eventually analysed present stone jambs and wooden windows, whose glass is sometimes encircled within a thin lead frame of either circular or quadrangular shape. Throughout all the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the production of glass was in fact very complicate and expensive and the maximum dimensions of a glazed slab were extremely limited. The peculiar look of the windows of those times was due to the fact that the glass was blown by artisans into a bubble through the aid of a blowpipe: the bubble would be later open and modelled into a circular shape. In order to cover a big surface it was consequently needed a support on which the different circular glasses could be mounted (fig. 13). In the 17th century the secrets of most efficient glass production of the time, well protected by the Republic of Venice, were successfully stolen by the French king Louis XIV² and spread all over Europe, providing the market with cheaper alternatives and fostering the process of innovation. The consequences of the growing affordability of glass can be observed in 18th-century palaces (see chapter *Palazzo*), where the windows reached dimensions comparable to those of nowadays. While in some Italian and European examples the glazed surfaces of the palaces dared to go beyond utilitarian purposes, in Italian Rhaetia this happened rarely because of the harshness of the climate. Furthermore, the local aristocracy was used to maintain a certain degree of privacy and sobriety on the outside.

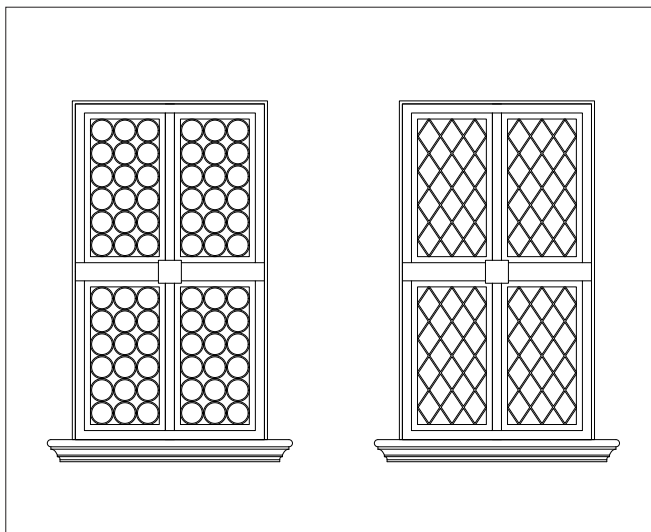


Fig. 13 - Two Windows of Palazzo Vertemate Franchi

Stone Windows

In the south alpine area, window jambs are most commonly realised in stone. The Italian Rhaetia makes no exception, and despite many medieval houses are abandoned, the solid construction of their openings is still standing. The trilithon window is found with both a wooden or a stone architrave, often decorated and well visible within the stonework thanks to their higher level of refinement. Sometimes the windows are marked by a plaster frame of around 30 centimetres, a technique that is also present outside the Italian Rhaetia³. In the Renaissance the stonework disappears, and the stone jambs with it: their lack is filled by stones decorated in form of a column, that with their tympanum atop emulate the shape of a temple. Sometimes the decoration is simply painted, as in the case of Palazzo Valenti in Talamona. In the following centuries the main change in the treatment of the windows is the enlargement of their dimensions, while the green of the stone frames assume sometimes an elegant

1 Benetti and Benetti, *Dimore Rurali di Valtellina e Valchiavenna*, 276.

2 Stéphane Bégoïn, "L'Invention du Luxe à la Française."

3 Benetti and Benetti, *Dimore Rurali di Valtellina e Valchiavenna*, 281.

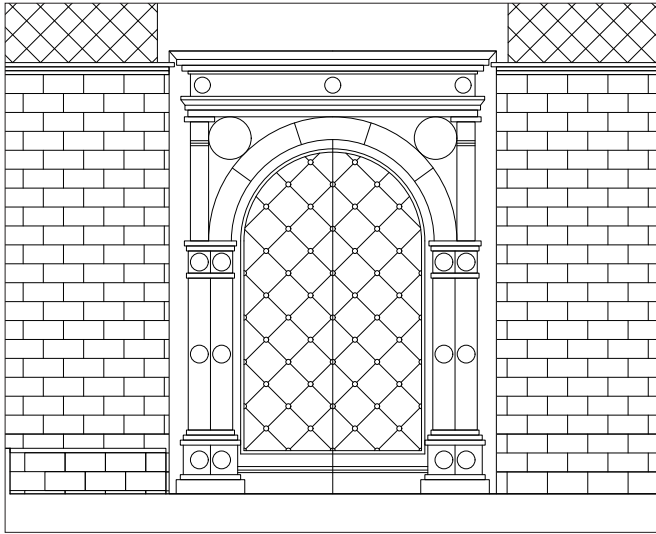


Fig. 14 - The Portal of Palazzo Besta

contrast of with the façade. In baroque times the transition from utilitarian to decoration element is complete: the presence of the stone jambs was recalled by stucco decorations.

Wooden Windows

The use of wood for window jambs is attested in Upper Valtellina, Val Bregaglia and Valchiavenna. Despite the different material, the constructive principle is the same: the jambs are constituted by a couple of vertical beams interlocked with two horizontal ones, within which the frame itself is attached. The dimensions are nevertheless inferior to those of stone windows: this is not due to the physical resistance of either (wood works better than stone as an architrave), but rather to the extreme conditions of the environment in which *Blockbau* buildings are most commonly found. In such cases the windows can be as little as 25 centimetres⁴ of side and are often provided with a shutter, that could grant an even better insulation. The window frame is on the other hand always out of wood, whatever the material of the walls.

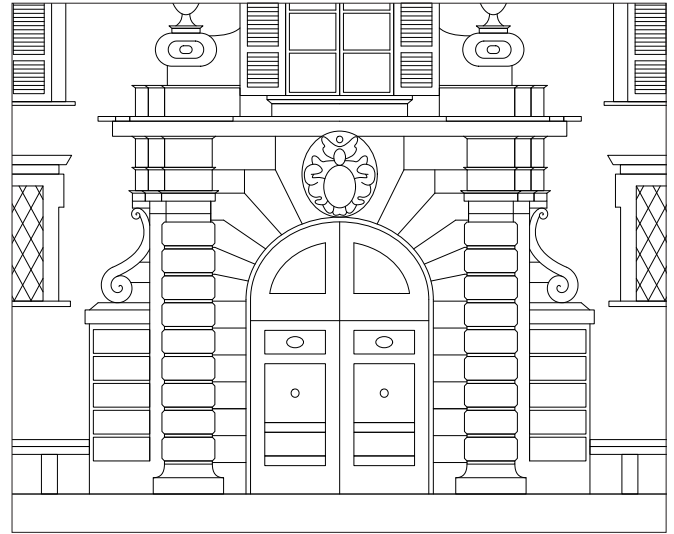


Fig. 15 - The Portal of Palazzo Salis

Portals as Elements of Continuity

Portals and doors constitute the first elements of the building with which dwellers and visitors actively interact. In the Italian Rhaetia the jambs had the same language for both windows and portals, before the latter followed a different path. According to the tradition of the Comacini Masters, doors were of rectangular shape: the stone jambs hosted a woodwork of horizontal or vertical planks, as can still be seen in the barns of numerous rural buildings. Parallel to the rectangular-shaped entrance, the arched-portal made its appearance in medieval times. The first attempts of creating an arch were simply made by two roughly-rounded stones leaning on each other⁵. Gradually, the union of smaller and more regular ashlar brought to the construction of preciser and more solid arches, to the point that its forms were already well-developed in the 15th century. With the grand houses of the Renaissance the portal reached its mature form: the sides are two granite stones or soap-stones, well worked and sometimes decorated, while the top is delimited by few blocks in the shape of arch. Sometimes the whole

4 Diego Giovanoli, *Facevano Case. 1450-1950* (Malans/Coira: Pro Grigioni Italiano, 2009), 68.

5 Benetti and Benetti, *Dimore Rurali di Valtellina e Valchiavenna*, 270.

portal is inserted within a bigger composition, like that of Palazzo Besta, that recalls a triumphal arch (fig. 14)⁶. In the houses of the aristocracy, the rectangular door continued to exist as a secondary entrance. From this point on, the portal will keep its general characteristics as far as the 19th century⁷: an interesting example to analyse the differences throughout time is the city of Chiavenna, where the abundance of grand houses allows a

(see chapter *Palazzo*), kept the 16th-century portal on the new baroque façade. Of course there are single cases of portals that have tried to escape the traditional model in order to apply a foreign design, as in the case of the portal of Palazzo Salis (fig. 15), but they are nonetheless an exception in the Rhaetian panorama. Lastly, just like the windows, the presence of both stone and wood is a constant fact almost everywhere.

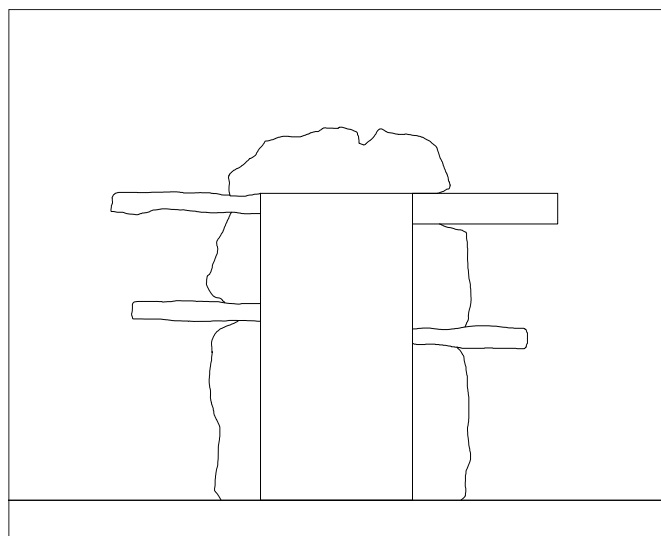


Fig. 16 - The Stone Frame of a House in Forcola

side-to-side comparison of the portals and confirms the homogeneous character of their design⁸. More innovative solutions were instead found in religious buildings⁹.

The portals of civil dwellings had more or less standard sizes, since they had to allow both a man, a horse and a chariot to pass through, and for this reason they were not object of improvement as the windows were. It is interesting to consider that Pietro Solari, the architect of Palazzo Sertoli in Sondrio

Stone Portals

The medieval portal is defined by the stacking of semi-worked stone blocks alternately disposed with an angle of 90 degrees, in a similar way as the building corners were constructed (fig. 7). The top is concluded by an architrave in stone or wood, usually with a hump on the upper side to better distribute the forces (fig. 16). Sometimes a jack arch takes up the structural duty of the hump. From the 16th century, exclusively on important buildings, the jambs are constituted by piers of maximum two pieces while the arch by three or five ashlar¹⁰. All the elements could be variously decorated and the date of construction was usually added on the central ashlar, together with the coat of arms of the family or their religious faith. Thanks to this common practice it has been possible to reconstruct the history of the building and their *terminus ante quem*. On the main portal of Palazzetto Besta, as well as on its window frames, the single blocks of green stone are decorated to represent a rustication: this semantic shift, that had eventually great success in the baroque era, refers to the ashlar of the medieval jack arch and underlines how the traditional forms had survived the technical innovation transforming into a decoration. A similar phenomenon is observed in the painted corner stones of the façades of Engadin and Valchiavenna, where the memory of the reinforced corners is still present.

6 Augusta Corbellini et al., *Porte, Portoni e Portali della Provincia di Sondrio* (Como: Nodolibri, 2007), 220.

7 Benetti and Benetti, *Dimore Rurali di Valtellina e Valchiavenna*, 277.

8 Corbellini et al., *Porte, Portoni e Portali della Provincia di Sondrio*, 91.

9 Ibid., 131.

10 Ibid., 173.

Wooden Portals

Examples of entirely wooden construction of a door can be found in the areas of *Blockbau* construction (see chapter *Walls*, fig. 8), as well as in few mixed buildings scattered along the valley¹¹. In any case, they are exclusive of rural constructions, being wood less safe and easily burnable and consequently not apt to the standards of the aristocracy.

11 Ibid., 141.

Ceilings and Slabs

Materials

As for wall construction, the main materials used for the ceilings are stone and wood. In the rural house of the Late Middle Ages, especially in the tower-house typology, the ground floor was usually covered by a barrel vault out of raw stones, stabilized through the use of mortar. Far from any artistic intention, the vault was the best solution for distributing the efforts

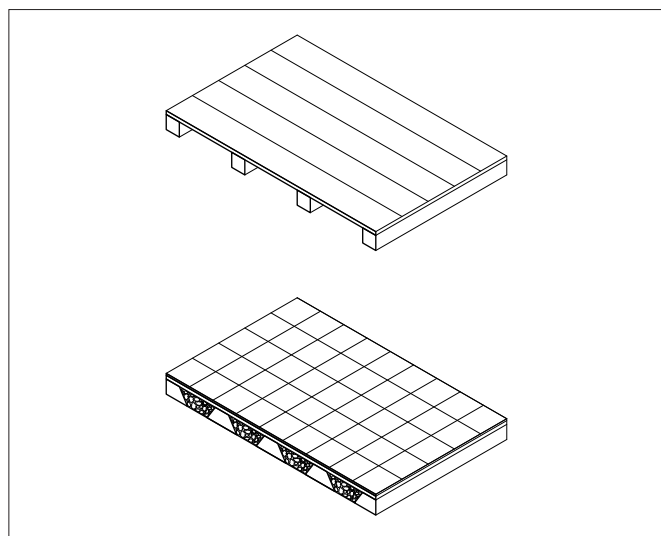


Fig. 17 - A Mixed Slab and a Wooden Slab

of the upper storeys, especially in building articulating on more than three levels¹ (see chapter *Dwelling*). A wooden structure, lighter, was used for the other slabs, which were often made of squared or rounded beams supporting wooden planks (fig. 17). In some cases the beams were passing through holes in the wall to grant a better stability. An in-between solution is constituted by the mixed slab (fig. 17), whose main structure is composed by trapezoidal beams positioned close to each other: the

gaps within the beams are filled by small stones and mortar. The same solutions are also applied to grand houses, with the difference that the level of refinement, complexity and attention to the detail was higher, also due to their bigger dimensions.

Vaults

The use of the barrel vault, often with large spans, is also well established in rural buildingx, as in the example of a medieval house in Sulini, in the municipality of Caiolo². Its diffusion in the area of Italian Rhaetia dates back to the 15th century³, as shown by recent studies. In some villages there are covered passages, called *pòrtegh*, protected by stone vaults. In the case of Cedrasco, unknown builders managed to realise cross vaults⁴, testifying the advanced constructive knowledge of medieval peasant society. The advantage of the vault is the possibility of superimposing a series of large spaces: for this reason, it is common to find them in the mansions of the aristocracy, as well as for the realisation of wide cellars where to store big wine barrels. Needless to say, vaults are mainly realised in stone, even though there are some exceptions, as it has been discovered during the restoration of Palazzo Sertoli in Sondrio (see chapter *Palazzo*). Some vaults of the latter are supported by light wooden cross-beams whose gaps are filled by lime⁵. A common technique for rural buildings or service areas involved the use of stone ashlars positioned vertically and joined together with abundant use of mortar, while in the case of reception areas, possibly also frescoed, the vault is plastered. Plastered are also the nailed vaults that, starting from the Renaissance, spread all over the territory of Italian Rhaetia. Their realisation was quite complicated and frequently endangered the stability of the whole edifice, as it happened in Palazzo Vertemate Franchi where buttresses had to be added on the north-west façade.

1 Benetti and Benetti, *Dimore Rurali di Valtellina e Valchiavenna*, 275.

2 Benetti, *Dimore Rurali Medievali del Versante Orobico Valtellinese*, 108.

3 Della Misericordia, Rao and Baruta, "Il Paesaggio Nobiliare: Castelli, Torri e Palazzi fra Medioevo ed Età Moderna."

4 Benetti, *Dimore Rurali Medievali del Versante Orobico Valtellinese*, 124.

5 Battista Leoni et al., *Palazzo Sertoli in Sondrio* (Sondrio: Credito Valtellinese, 1989), 20.

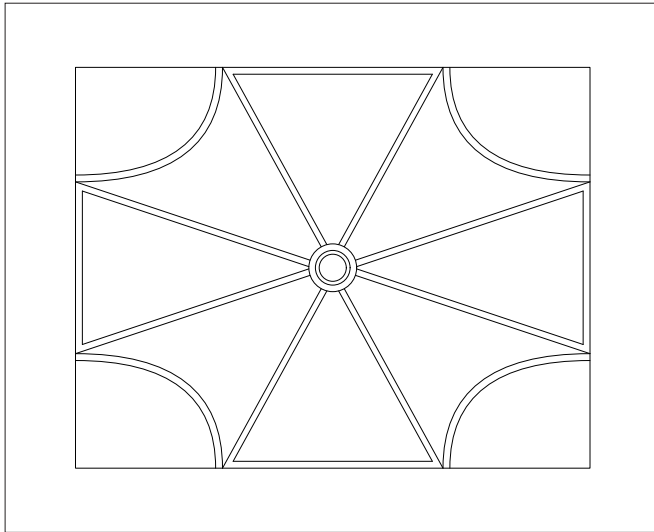


Fig. 18 - The Octagonal Vault of the Staircase of Palazzo Salis

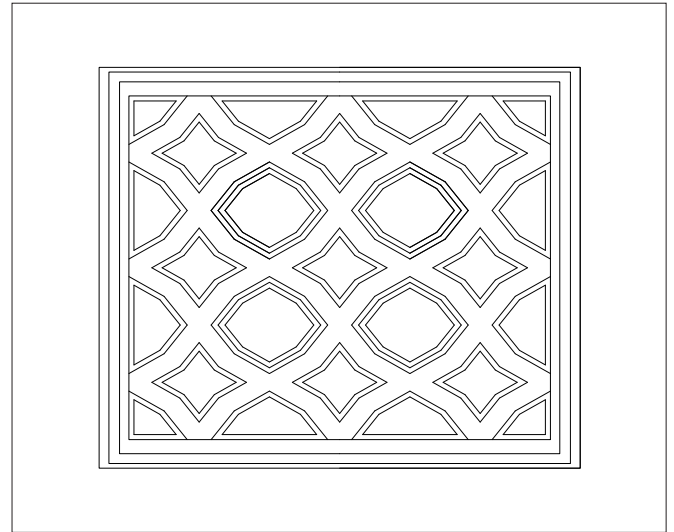


Fig. 19 - The Wooden Ceiling of the Hall of Caryatids in Palazzo Vertemate Franchi

Wooden Ceilings

The use of wood in the slabs was not limited to the structural function. Beside the special case of the *stüa* (see chapter *Spaces*), panels with complex motifs and drawings were realised by woodcarvers and mounted on the ceilings as a way of decorating a room. The level of refinement was extremely high and could compete with the paintings that often adorned the walls. Quite diffuse from the Renaissance onwards was the coffered ceiling, whose geometric pattern could reach remarkable complexity (fig. 19). It became in some cases a tool for a play of perspective, as in the case of the corridor of Palazzo Vertemate Franchi, where the dimensions of the coffers gradually reduce giving the impression of a longer hallway. More rare, but nonetheless attested, is the use of wood to clad ceilings opened on the outside: the porch of the courtyard of Casa Borinelli in Chiuro presents a coffered ceiling realised in the 15th century⁶. From the 17th century the wooden ceilings gradually lost their importance and were relegated to minor spaces, where they

were painted with pastel colours and followed more complex shapes⁷. In general they could hardly reach the expressiveness required by the new baroque forms and were more dangerous and expansive than a painted ceiling. The wooden plafond of the Hall of Honour of Palazzo Salis was for example destroyed by a fire and substituted by a flat painted ceiling.

Painted Ceilings

Before the 15th century, in Valtellina frescoed paintings were rare and exclusively present on the houses of wealthy families⁸. They were usually realised on the main façade, either around a portal frame or in a plastered niche. While this tradition was carried on by the lower classes until the last century, from the Renaissance onwards the aristocracy started to use the interior ceilings as a blank canvas to be embellished by the artistic expressions of the time. Parallel to this phenomenon, some façades have been completely frescoed, but the religious subjects were substituted by coats of arms and abstract decorations, as can be still

6 Giampaolo Angelini et al., *Beni Culturali della Comunità Montana Valtellina di Sondrio* (Sondrio: Comunità Montana Valtellina di Sondrio, 2004), 89-90.

7 Valentina Negri et al., *Palazzi Signorili nella Rezia Italiana* (Sondrio: Edizioni World Images, 2017), 30.

8 Simonis, "Elementi Strutturali ed Elementi Decorativi nella Dimora Alpina," 97.

admired in Palazzo Quadrio Curzio in Ponte⁹. The consequence of the loss of importance of the outside space ended up on focusing the artistic and monetary energies of the aristocracy on the inside spaces, especially on the various halls to entertain the guests. An astonishing example is the Hall of Creation within Palazzo Besta, where the walls are simply emulating a stone architecture that pretends to support the frescoed vault. The building in which the contrast between plain elevation and rich interior is more evident is undoubtedly Palazzo Vertemate Franchi: the visitor is immersed in the richness of the pictorial decorations already from the hallway, whose barrel vault leads to the frescoed loggia opening on the courtyard. Even the ceiling of the *Stüa* of Juno, which would have to be clad in wood, is left plastered and painted with mythological scene of renaissance taste.

With the 17th century the outside paintings almost completely disappeared from villas and palaces, one of the last example being Palazzo Valenti in Talamona. On the other side of the Alps though, and partially also in Val Bregaglia, the renaissance influence had the opposite effect and fostered a wave of outside decoration, both with paint and sgraffito, that gave to the *Engadiner Haus* its peculiar look. With the baroque style approaching, they were not only the vaults to be painted: the Hall of Honour of Palazzo Salis in Tirano has a flat ceiling whose geometry is distorted by the pictorial decoration itself. Unlike Palazzo Besta, where the fresco had to adapt to the specific shape of the ceiling, in the baroque time the artist was not anymore chained by the constraints of the space but could freely break any physical limitation with plays of perspectives and proportions.

9 Angelini et al., *Beni Culturali della Comunità Montana Valtellina di Sondrio*, 91.

Spaces

General Considerations

Generally speaking, the house types of the Italian Rhaetia do not show particular complexity in plan organisation, nor do they present extremely specialised rooms. The limited space available, especially in rural houses, is reflected in the repetition of a rectangular module that does not talk about a specific function, but rather about a desire of versatility. This is only partially true in the case of grand houses, where a hierarchy of spaces actually exists. Nevertheless, as the case of Palazzo Besta shows, the spaces continuously changed affectation throughout time, to the point that a bedroom could become a parlour and vice-versa. In fact, the rooms are often named after their pictorial decorations rather than their actual function: the first was more unlikely to change than the second. That said, there are some specific spaces whose characteristics deserve to be deepened, either because they are only found in this specific area or because their features are different from the standard knowledge we have of it.

Courtyard

The courtyard assumes in the Italian Rhaetia different connotations. While in Lower Valtellina it indicates the common space shared by the surrounding houses, organised usually on three sides of a rectangular space, from Middle Valtellina onwards it refers to an enclosed space within the building block. In Val Bregaglia and Val Poschiavo the courtyard was a completely covered space on the ground floor, often giving access to the stable. Even though the term is the same, the origin of the very space has different roots: in the areas closer to Lake Como the influx of the Po Valley house is still strong, but slowly fades proceeding towards east. The houses become closed in themselves¹, often a whole quarter is walled, in order provide a first instance of defence in case of foreign raids. With the coming of the Renaissance such existent typologies were overlapped by a new idea of courtyard, a representative and leisure space often more decorated than the outer façades. It must be also

remembered that most of the palaces built in the 15th and 16th century had to deal with medieval pre-existences that strongly influenced their final layout and sometimes prevented the pure application of eurhythmic principles.

Gallery

The gallery was a crucial element of the rural dwelling of Lower and Middle Valtellina from the Middle Ages onwards. It is a common feature of houses that developed on at least two floors, as well as of fortified residences like castles and house-forts. It is possible just to imagine their contribute to the façade of the latter, since no example has survived the pass of time; their look can be hypothesised from the position of the putlog holes. Galleries were exclusively made out of wood: the beams were stuck in the wall and formed a corbel on which the planks could sit. The

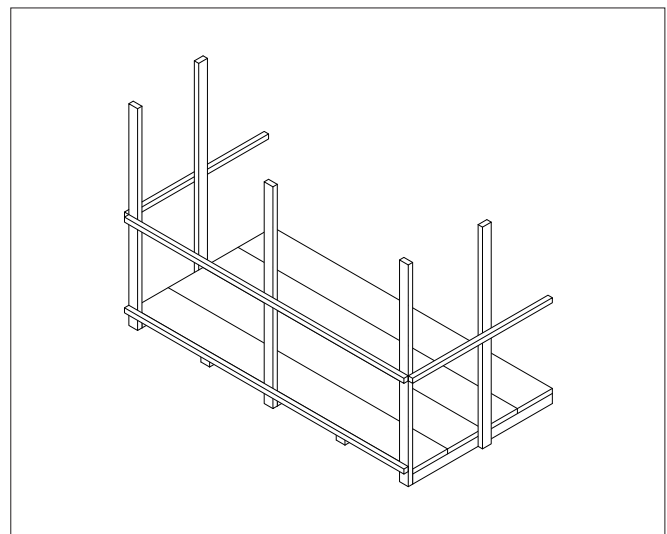


Fig. 20 - A Wooden Gallery

galleries were in fact always exposed to the sun: vertical trunks formed at the same time a balustrade and a support on which the crops could be left to dry (fig. 20). For this reason there are no examples of galleries at the higher altitudes and generally

¹ Gianmaria Origgi et al., *Cultura del Costruire e dell'Abitare in Valtellina* (Milan: ERSAP Dipartimento Montagna e Spazi Verdi, 2015), 22.

after 1000 metres² their presence stops, since no cereals could grow in those areas.

Loggia

Tightly connected with the courtyard is the element of the loggia. In its primitive forms it existed already in medieval tower-houses as circulation space, protected by the roof but still open on the outside (see chapter *Dwelling*). The vertical elements were stone pillars, of squared section, on which the wooden slabs could sit. With the evolution of the rural dwelling the loggia was incorporated within the building, like the example of the Cà Comūna in Caspano³, and the gallery was introduced as open cantilevered space. In the palace typology the loggia had on the contrary great success, as it became the element overlooking the courtyard and was consequently embellished by stone colonnades and painted cross-vaults. Typical of the Valtellina renaissance culture is the superimposition of two orders of columns, whose number in the first floor is double that of the ground floor. The best application of this principle can be observed in Casa Carbonera (fig. 21) and Palazzo Besta. A rare example of a wooden loggia, with decorated capitals, is found in Palazzo Quadrio De Maria Pontaschelli⁴. In baroque times the loggia basically disappears: once lost the cultural value of the courtyard and the plays of perspective, it is not needed anymore. It becomes a corridor, either glazed as in Palazzo Sertoli or simply walled as in Palazzo Sassi De' Lavizzari. In the late 19th century, with the movement of historicism spreading around Europe, the superimposed loggia of the Renaissance will be interpreted as a Rhaetian peculiar element and inserted in the restoration of two important buildings, Palazzo Pretorio in Sondrio and Villa Visconti Venosta in Grosio⁵.

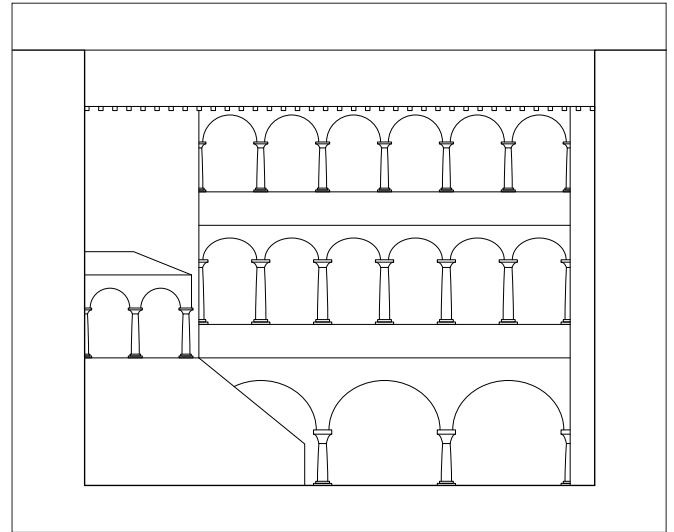


Fig. 21 - The Loggia of Casa Carbonera

Suler

In the habitations of Ancient Rome, the term *solarium* used to refer to a part of the house exposed to the sun⁶. It was usually a loggia, inherited by the Etruscan culture, located under the roof: hence the Italian word *solaio*, meaning attic. In the Italian Rhaetia, whose main common cultural element is the Lombard language, the term evolved differently and ended up referring to different rooms according to the area. In Lower Valtellina the *suler* (also known as *solé*, *solée*, *sulair*) indicates the bedroom, while in Val Masino the barn. In Val Bregaglia, Val Poschiavo and Engadin it defines the corridor above the courtyard (see chapter *Dwelling*), as in the example of Casa Castelmur. The word *suler* has a double meaning in Vallespluga, located in between Val Bregaglia and Valtellina, as it refers both to the bedroom and to the living room⁷.

2 Benetti and Benetti, *Dimore Rurali di Valtellina e Valchiavenna*, 277.

3 Ibid., 145.

4 Comunità Montana Valtellina di Sondrio, "Chiuro. Itinerari fra Storia ed Arte."

5 Angelini, "Prima del Museo: Emilio Visconti Venosta tra Collezionismo e Tutela," 60.

6 Giovanni Patroni, "Solario."

7 Giovanoli, *Facevano Case. 1450-1950*, 377.

Stüa

If there is a room that is really typical of the Rhaetian area, that is undoubtedly the *stüa*. The term itself comes from the German word *Stube*, that originated also the English *stove* and the Italian *stufa*. It is in fact a typology which is widely diffused all over the Alps, especially in the German and Italian-speaking parts. The *stüa* is a room completely clad in wood; the most commonly used woods are chestnut, walnut, spruce and Swiss pine⁸. It often was the only heated room of the house and hosted all the communal activities of the family. In some cases, as in some *bait* of Val Livigno, it was used as a bedroom as well. The first information about the *stüa* dates back to the end of the 12th century: it was initially exclusively present in monasteries, castles and grand houses⁹. Soon it became an element of the rural dwelling as well, mainly north of the Alps, where it was introduced also the element of the stove after which is named the room. In the Italian Rhaetia the *stüa* became widely attested from the 15th century on: the heater was locally called *pigna*, as it is still known nowadays. With the *pigna* eventually covered with majolica tiles and the wooden planks filled with decorations, the *stüa* encountered the favour of the aristocracy, that contributed to the diffusion of this typology within their fiefs. It was in fact imported in Valtellina by the Grison rulers and soon adopted by the local nobles. Extremely useful for the rigid climate of Upper Valtellina and Valchiavenna, it never replaced the smoke chamber of Middle and Lower Valtellina, where the *stüa* was a prerogative of the rich. The whole importance of the room was due to the presence of the hearth, which was used also to dry the laundry but especially to warm up on cold days. A small ladder allowed to lean on a wooden plank, called *magis*¹⁰, on top of the stove. A special type of *stüa* is the so-called *stüa mata*, in which no wooden cladding is present but the walls are simply made by the *Blockbau* construction of the house itself. In some cases, the *stüa mata* was later incorporated within a

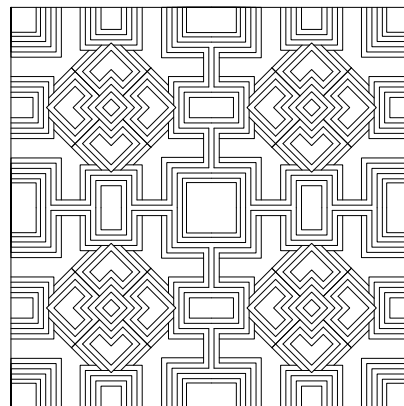


Fig. 22 - The Coffered Ceiling of the 16th-Century *Stüa* of Palazzo Besta

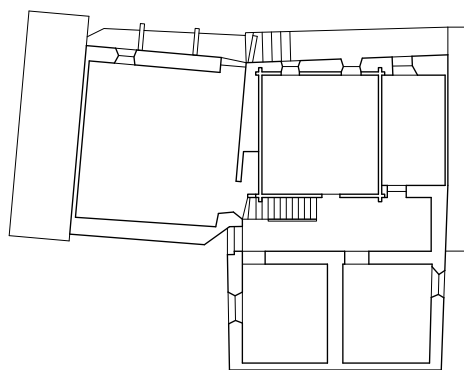


Fig. 23 - The Plan of Cà Bardassa with the *Stüa Mata*

larger stone construction (fig. 23), as in the case of Cà Bardassa in the municipality of Campodolcino.

8 Dario Benetti et al., *La "Stüa" nella Rezia Italiana* (Sondrio: Edizioni World Images, 2011), 13.

9 Ibid., 8.

10 Ibid., 12.

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Casa Tomé, Poschiavo (CH)



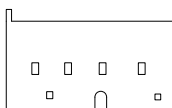
Casa Vecchia, Trepalle (I)



Casa Vaninetti, Sacco (I)



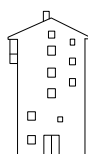
Casa Castelmur, Vicosoprano (CH)



Castello Paribelli, Albosaggia (I)



Torre dei Da Pendolasco, Poggiridenti (I)



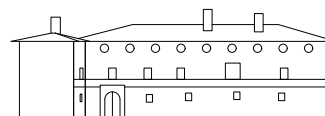
Casa Alta, Soglio (CH)



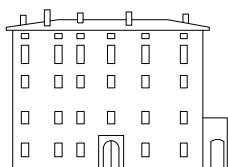
Casa dei Paganini, Delebio (I)



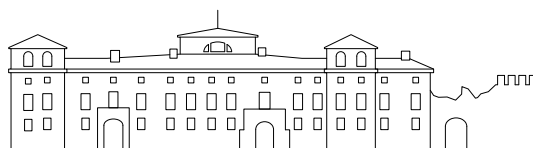
Palazzo Rurale, Pedemonte (I)



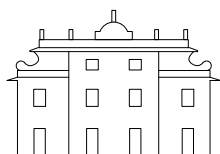
Palazzo Besta, Teglio (I)



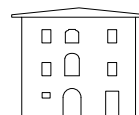
Palazzo Sassi De' Lavizzari, Sondrio (I)



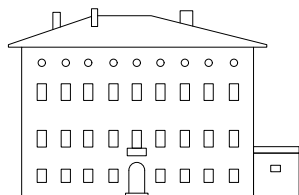
Palazzo Salis, Tirano (I)



Palazzo Salis Tagstein, Chiavenna (I)



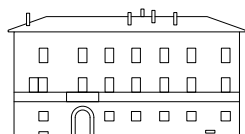
Palazzo Sertoli, Sondrio (I)



Palazzo Malacrida, Morbegno (I)



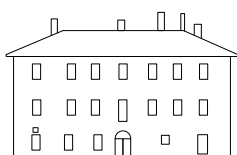
Tenuta La Gatta, Bianzone (I)



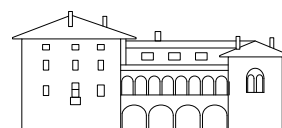
Palazzo Pretorio, Sondrio (I)



Palazzo Vertemate Franchi, Piuro (I)

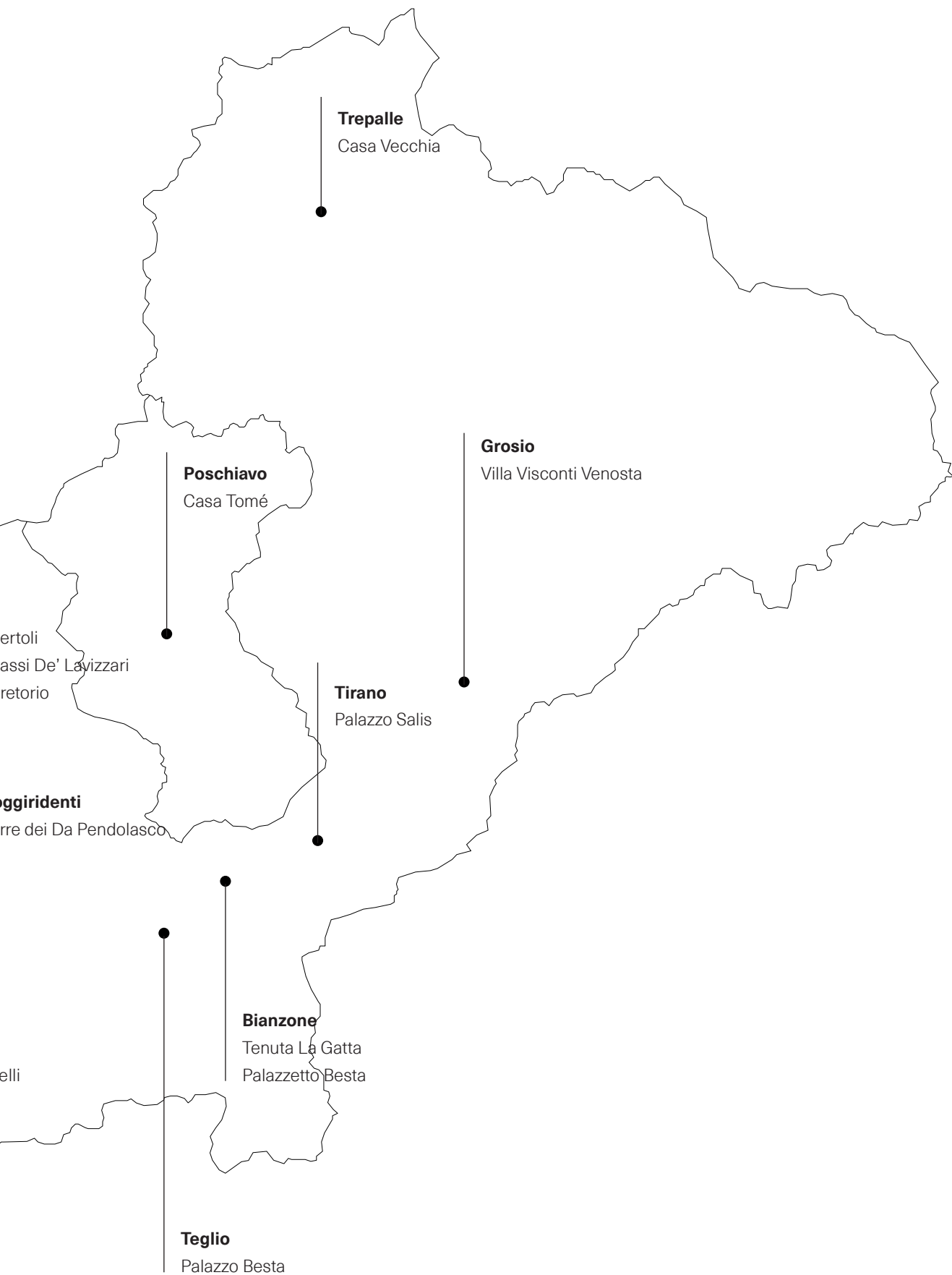


Palazzetto Besta, Bianzone (I)



Villa Visconti Venosta, Grosio (I)





Nus fabrichain sü bellas chà
E savain da nu stair in eternità
Mo il lö inua saimper gian astar
Sün quel ans im pisain dirar.

Sgraffito on a House in Engadin (Stradun 33, CH-7545 Guarda).

Dwelling

Heating as a Criterion of Classification

The simple dwelling is the first form of habitation that must be considered when tackling the housing topic. Of interest for this investigation are the permanently inhabited buildings, that can be distinguished according to their interior organisation. The chosen examples present an horizontal development, sometimes combined with a vertical one; the purely vertical development has been included within the tower typology (see chapter *Tower*). The main difference according to which we can group rural houses is the presence of either of two heating solutions: the smoke chamber and the *stüa*-kitchen. In some areas the two are combined together, for example in Val Livigno in Upper Valtellina, otherwise there is always a strong predominance of either of two (see chapter *Spaces*). The heated room is of course crucial within the alpine dwelling because it constitutes the nucleus of the house, around or on top of which the other rooms are placed. For this reason it can be considered as the main criterion for classification of the rural dwellings and marks a crucial difference with other typologies like the one of the palace. Moreover, from the study of the examples taken into consideration, it has emerged that there may be a relation between the type of heating and the circulation, whose presence outside can be justified by the fact that the smoke could not reach the upper rooms by mean of the stairwell. The smoke chamber in fact, like the external circulation by means of galleries, is the most archaic solution. On the other hand, an inside circulation system is very often accompanied by the presence of the *stüa*.

Smoke Chamber

The smoke chamber is indigenous of Italian Rhaetia and it is the simplest solution that can be found in the Alps¹. In the smoke chamber (*camera a fumo*) the hearth is located at the centre of

the main room and is made of four rectangular stones above which a chain is hanged. No flues are initially present and the smoke is evacuated through the windows and a specific opening top of the door.

Stüa-Kitchen

The *stüa*, as it has been said, is originary of Engadin and has been imported in Valtellina and Valchiavenna during the Grison domination. This is also geographically proved by the fact that the *stüa* in the rural house is mostly attested in Valchiavenna and in Upper Valtellina², areas that were closer and culturally more related with the Three Leagues. An exception is represented by the Val Corta, a subsidiary valley of the Val Tartano in Middle Valtellina, where the *stüa* is also commonly found.

Post-Medieval Developments

In Valtellina and Valchiavenna the distinction between classes was not that visible architecturally speaking: the belonging of a family to a higher class was initially expressed by a larger size of the house and possibly by wall frescoes or decorations on the jambs. An example in this sense can be observed in the Casa della Civetta in Fusine³. Things started to change from the 15th century onwards, when the rural typology is gradually improved in order to adapt it to the prestige of the wealthier classes. It is from the mid-17th century in villages like Poschiavo⁴, but already from the beginning of the 16th century as far as single representative buildings in Valtellina were concerned, that foreign models and influxes were introduced. At the same time, just like it happened to mansions belonging to aristocratic families, also some rural houses happened to be thoroughly renovated and embellished from the 15th century onwards⁵. We therefore move from an aggregation of living and agricultural

1 Benetti and Benetti, *Dimore Rurali di Valtellina e Valchiavenna*, 38.

2 Ottavio Lurati et al., *Mondo Popolare in Lombardia. Sondrio e il suo Territorio* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 1995), 43.

3 Benetti, *Dimore Rurali Medievali del Versante Orobico Valtellinese*, 133.

4 Giovanoli, *Facevano Case. 1450-1950*, 119.

5 Benetti, *Dimore Rurali Medievali del Versante Orobico Valtellinese*, 252.

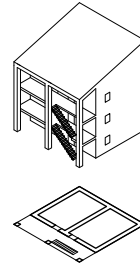


Fig. 24 - Two-Room House

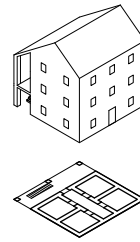


Fig. 25 - Deep House

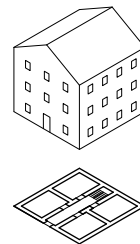


Fig. 26 - Hallway House

spaces, irregular in plan and elevation, to a more ordered and orthogonal composition, mainly the result of the principles of geometry and symmetry introduced by the Renaissance, as can be seen for example in the houses built by the Landolfi family in Poschiavo⁶. The aesthetic and typological gap between patrician and popular dwellings steadily grew, bringing to the point where the distinction of architectural language was clear and easily recognisable. While rural houses were still built with medieval language and techniques, the dwellings of the wealthy abandoned their rustic origins and got closer to the palace typology.

Plan Organisation as a Criterion of Classification

Beside the subdivision according to the heating solution, the dwellings can be analysed according to their plan organisation, which is reflected in their outer appearance but does not forcibly correspond to one of the two systems previously described. To do so it results useful the classification that Rossi, Consolascio and Bosshard have presented in their study on the Canton of Ticino⁷, seen the common cultural background to which also the Italian Rhaetia belongs. Simplifying, we could distinguish three types: the two-room house, the deep house and the hallway house.

Two-Room House

The two-room house (fig. 24) presents a couple of squared or rectangular rooms on every storey, horizontally disposed one next to the other: it could be seen as the union of two tower-houses (see chapter *Tower*). Unlike the latter, the rooms' functions are organised vertically but also horizontally and are connected through staircases and external galleries. These are usually parallel to the roof ridge. The main façade is usually the one with the gallery: this element made the two-room house to

evolve lately into the typology of the house with loggia, in which the number of rooms is not anymore relevant⁸. In any case, it rarely overpass the height of three storeys.

Deep House

Contrarily to the two-room house, the spaces of the deep house (fig. 25) are juxtaposed in depth, giving origin to a narrow and long dwelling. The access is placed on the longer side, from which a corridor permits to access the rooms. Sometimes a gallery, also adjacent to the longer side, is added to serve the upper floors. The ridge is in this case perpendicular to the façade, that is usually overlooking a street when in an urban centre or the valley floor when in the mountains. It is usually made of two or three storeys.

Hallway House

The most evolved and complex type is the hallway house (fig. 26), which can derive from multiple aggregation of either of the previous two types or can be conceived directly as such. Mature examples of hallway houses can be already found in the 16th century in Engadin and Val Bregaglia, reason for which it is also called *Romansh House*⁹, but also in the County of Chiavenna. In Valtellina it affirms itself as most common typology only in the 19th and 20th century: before that, it was prerogative of the wealthy classes only. The main entrance, usually centred on the main façade, introduces to a corridor that hosts the staircase and along which the rooms are disposed. In some cases the corridor ends on a garden or on rural spaces like stables or barns. There is no fixed rule concerning the roof, that can be either a gable or a pavilion one, depending on the areas in question. The hallway house has a usual size of three storeys.

6 Giovanoli, *Facevano Case. 1450-1950*, 120.

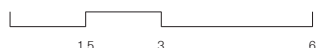
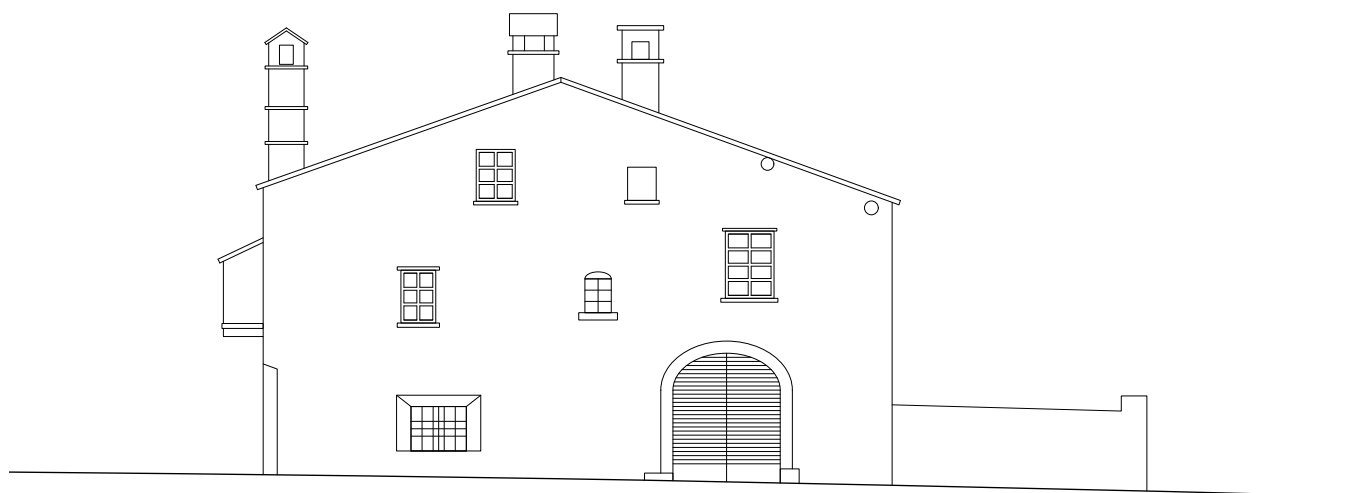
7 Aldo Rossi, Eraldo Consolascio and Max Bosshard, *La Costruzione del Territorio nel Cantone Ticino* (Lugano: Fondazione Ticino Nostro, 1979), 430.

8 Ibid., 434.

9 Hunziker, *La Maison Suisse. Troisième Partie: Les Grisons*, 19.

Casa Tomé

Via di Puntunai 180, CH-7742 Poschiavo
1357
1014 masl



West Elevation

Historical Notes

Casa Tomé is one of the best preserved rural buildings of the Alps, thanks to the fact that has been continuously inhabited, lately by the Tomé family, until the 1990s. Built in the 14th century, the fact that hasn't undergone major modifications for a long period of time makes it possible to comprehend the original characteristics of the medieval dwelling in Val Poschiavo. Another peculiarity it is constituted by the fact that, in its evolution through time, its heating was provided firstly by a smoke chamber and eventually by a *stüa* and a kitchen: the original nucleus was in fact what nowadays is the north side of the house, on whose first floor the fireplace was located. The circulation was

then external and no chimney was present, until mid-15th century when part of the walled courtyard (called *curt* in the local dialect) had been covered with a *Blockbau* construction within which a *stüa* was housed¹⁰. The addition of a chimney completed the *stüa*-kitchen type of dwelling, whose transformation happened quite early compared to the rest of Italian Rhaetia: this is due to the closeness with Engadin and the strong influence that the rest of the Grisons had on Val Poschiavo. Only in mid-18th century also the rear of the original courtyard has been implemented in the house, creating the space for another *stüa* and giving Casa Tomé the current look: at that time the house was probably used by two families sharing the facilities.

10 Musei Valposchiavo, "Casa Tomé. Tappe Evolutive."



Façade

The different phases of construction are visible also through the irregular disposition of the openings, whose only criterion of positioning is purely utilitarian. The façade is in stone and mortar, there are no signs of plaster and it is free of any decoration: also the portal, wide and arched as in the rest of the Italian Rhaetia, does not present a stone frame. Unknown to Casa Tomé is the medieval trilithon system that characterise for example Casa della Civetta in Fusine¹¹: the two share a similar outer shape, but the house in Poschiavo does not have corner ashlar nor

massive stones as window jambs. Currently the house presents a gable roof, but initially it had a single-pitched one like some of the tower-houses still visible in the valley.

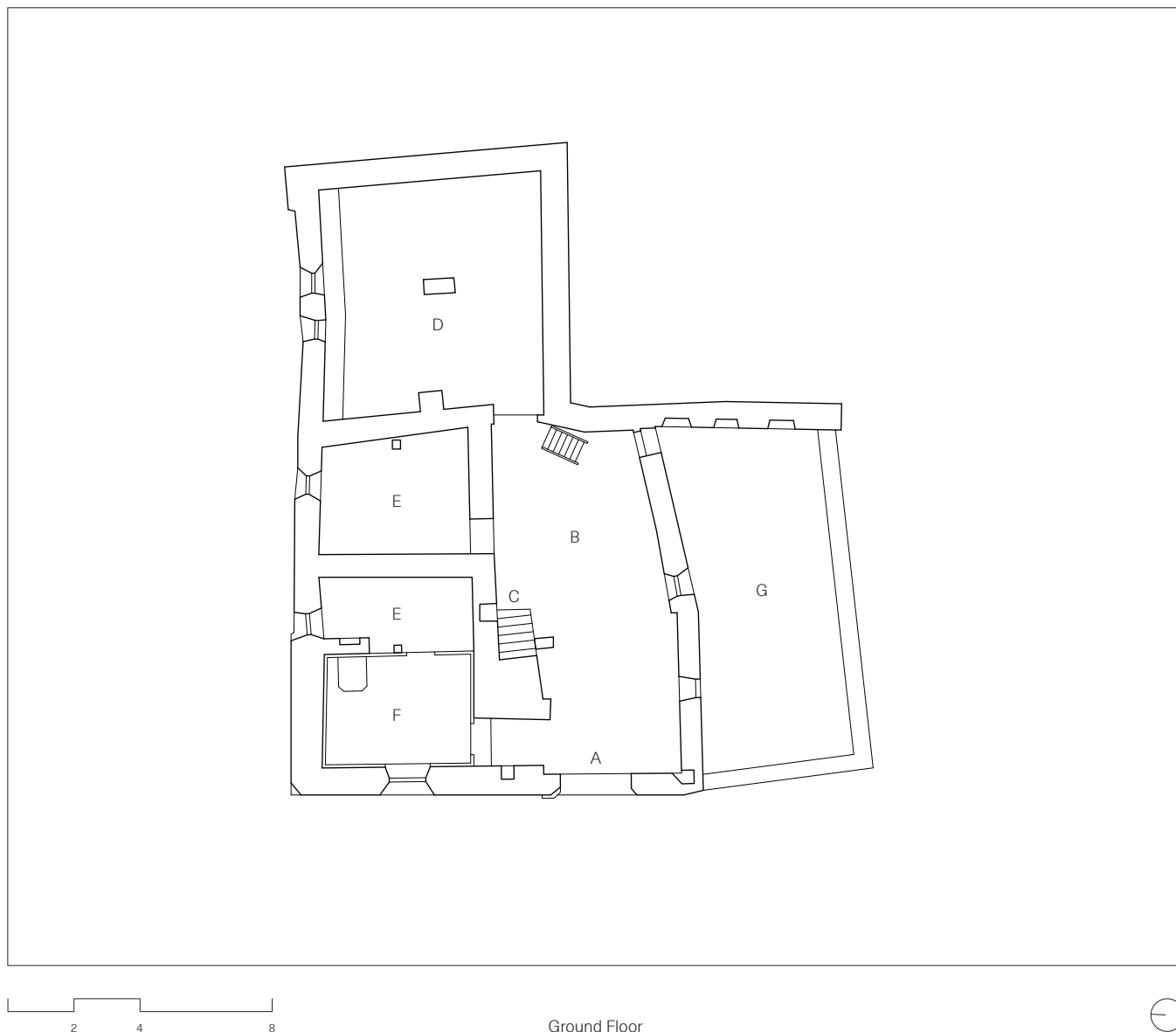
Interior Organisation

The building does not present vaulted spaces, attesting its 14th century origin faithful to the old tradition¹². In fact vaulted spaces started to become common from the mid-15th century¹³. The main characteristic of the Val Poschiavo house is the juxtaposition of rural and dwelling spaces inside the same volume, typi-

11 Benetti, *Dimore Rurali Medievali del Versante Orobico Valtellinese*, 133.

12 Giovanoli, *Facevano Case. 1450-1950*, 109.

13 Della Misericordia, Rao and Baruta, "Il Paesaggio Nobiliare: Castelli, Torri e Palazzi fra Medioevo ed Età Moderna."



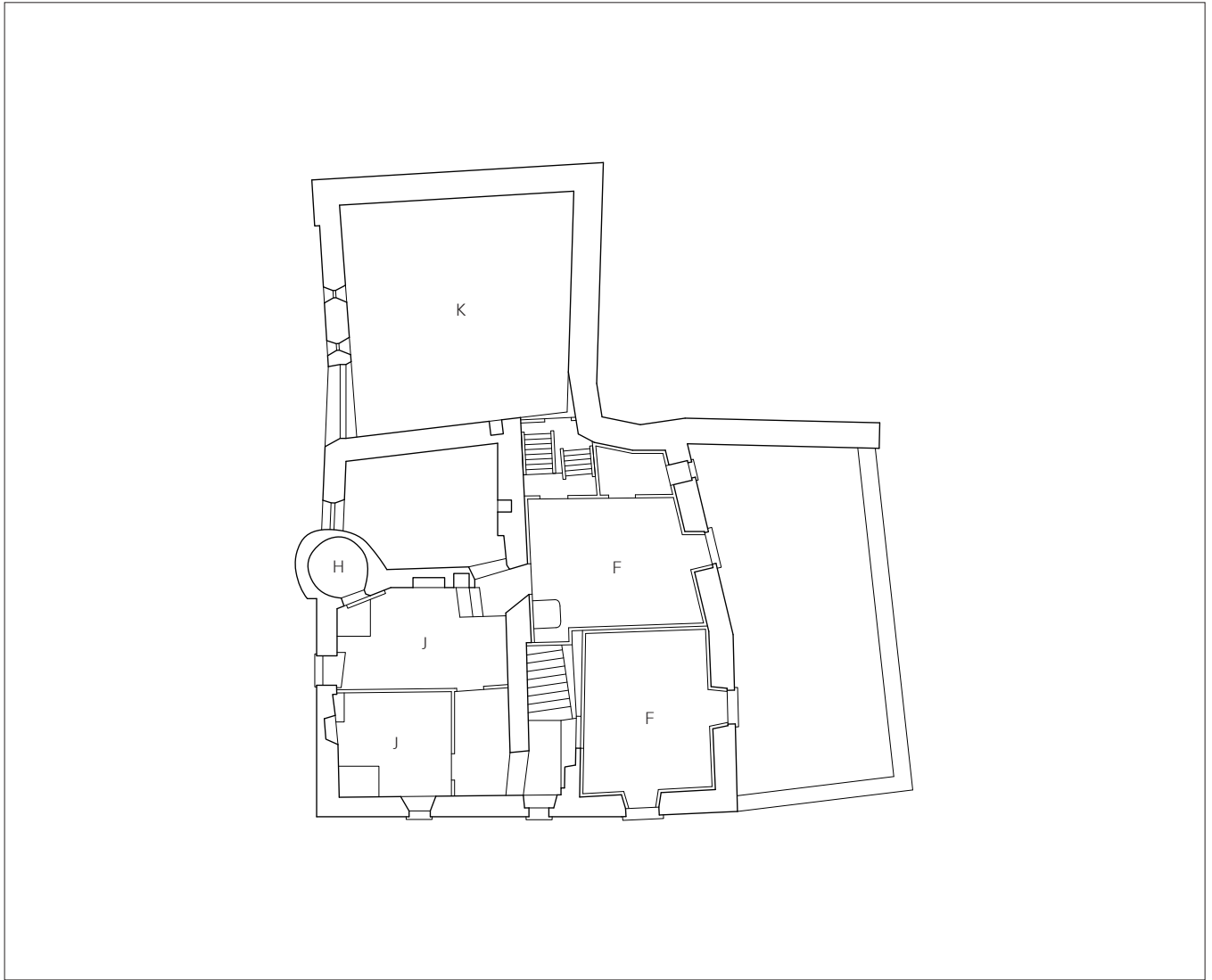
cal also of the former County of Bormio¹⁴ and different from the case of the rest of Valtellina, where the two are usually separated or on different levels¹⁵. Differently from the case of Engadin, there is a single access that leads to the courtyard¹⁶. The latter is open and divided from the rooms by a corridor that hosts the vertical circulation. The rooms were initially occupied by both the hearth and the bed, as it often happened in the houses at the higher altitudes like the Casa Vecchia: the two were eventually separated. The presence of the oven, whose rounded wall is well visible also from outside, is another point in common with

the architecture of High Valtellina and suggests its later addition.

14 Lurati et al., *Mondo Popolare in Lombardia. Sondrio e il suo Territorio*, 45.

15 Benetti, "A Confini tra le Diverse Culture: le Tipologie delle Dimore Rurali in Valtellina e Valchiavenna," 308.

16 Hunziker, *La Maison Suisse. Troisième Partie: Les Grisons*, 30.



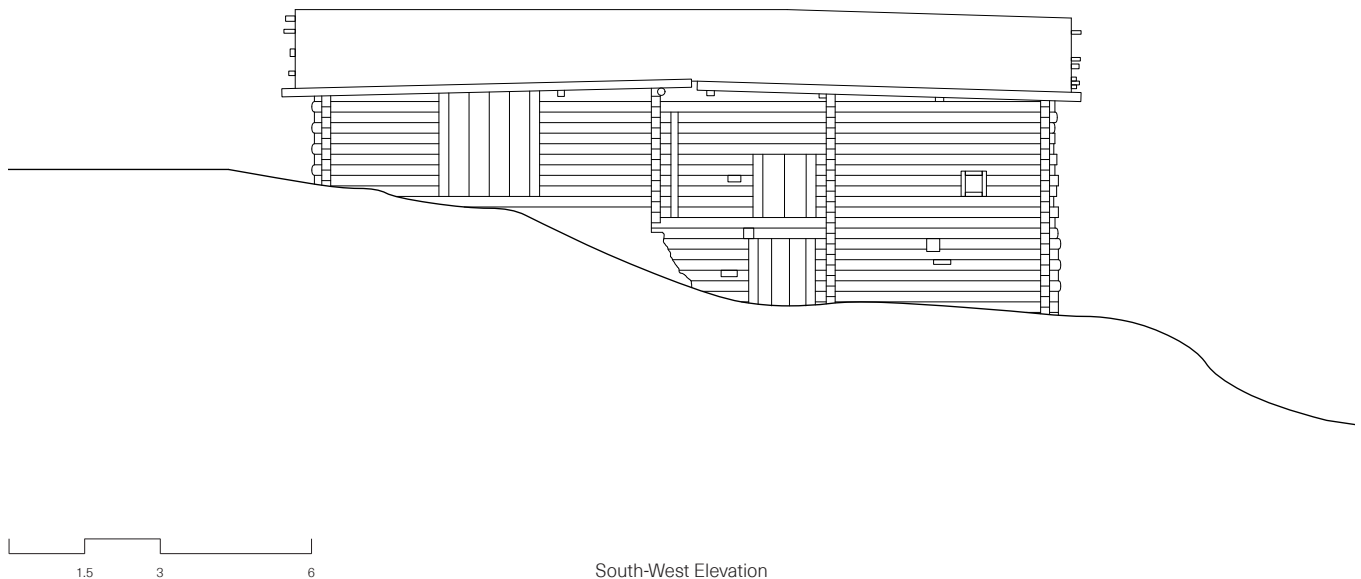
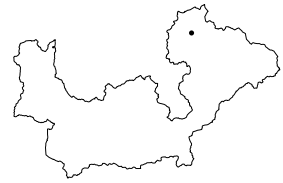
First Floor



- A - Entrance
- B - Courtyard (*Curt*)
- C - Stairs
- D - Stable
- E - Cellar
- F - *Stüa*
- G - Enclosure
- H - Oven
- J - Kitchen
- K - Barn

Casa Vecchia

Via Chésa Véglia 10, I-23041 Trepalle
1442
2169 masl



Historical Notes

Located in the village of Trepalle, the highest municipality in Italy, Casa Vecchia stands alone in the steep lawns of High Valtellina and has survived until now in its original conditions. The dwellings of the village do not form a tight agglomeration but are dispersed on the wide valley. Among more recent constructions, Casa Vecchia constitutes an example of old *baît*, a term of the local dialect to indicate a stable dwelling¹⁷ with the housing part in the front and the agricultural spaces in the back. This is a specific typology of Val Livigno¹⁸ that has been continuously realised until the 19th century without major changes: under the

same roof find in fact place the domestic and the rural spaces, one next to the other, as it was usual also in stone houses of the Italian-speaking Grisons.

Façade

Casa Vecchia is the only building, among those taken into consideration, built almost entirely out of wood. Its presence is relevant because it represents a type that has been crucial for the successful introduction of permanent settlements at the high altitudes of the Alps and that is well attested also in romance-speaking areas. Built on a slope, unlike the buildings of

17 Giovanoli, *Facevano Case. 1450-1950*, 374.

18 Ibid., 57.



Siteplan



Middle and Lower Valtellina, it positions perpendicularly to the mountain side. The beams of the façade are irregular in length and section and the few windows are squared and very small. A stone basement forms a sort of step on which the wood construction can solidly rely on: the *Blockbau* construction is stabilised by some lime mortar, that also better insulates the joints from the wind¹⁹.

Interior Organisation

The simple rectangular plan is divided in three parts by transversal elements of *Strickbau* on the ground floor and by a stone wall in the partly underground basement. Even though the plan

is quite basic, it already shares some features with the more complex hallway house, as for example the central circulation space hosting the staircase, as well as with the deep house, accessible from the side but with the difference that no external staircase is required thanks to the presence of the slope. Consequence of the latter is the existence of many accesses: one of them is located on the central and thinner strip of the basement that delimits a sort of covered corridor, called *kort*, that grants access to the stables. A staircase allows to reach the ground floor, where another large corridor (*streita*) divides the barn, the biggest space of the house also accessible from outside, from the *stüa mata* and the kitchen. The latter was in re-

- A - Entrance
- B - Covered Courtyard (*Kort*)
- C - Stable (*Stàla*)
- D - Cellar (*Stàlet*)
- E - Corridor (*Streita*)
- F - Barn (*Toilà*)
- G - *Stüa Mata*
- H - Kitchen (*Cogina*)
- I - Attic (*Krapéna*)

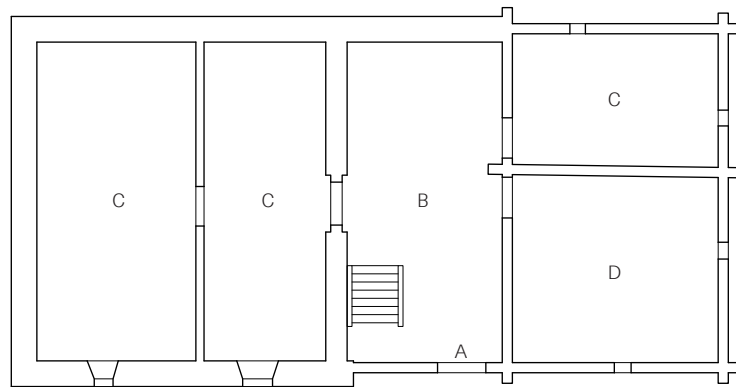
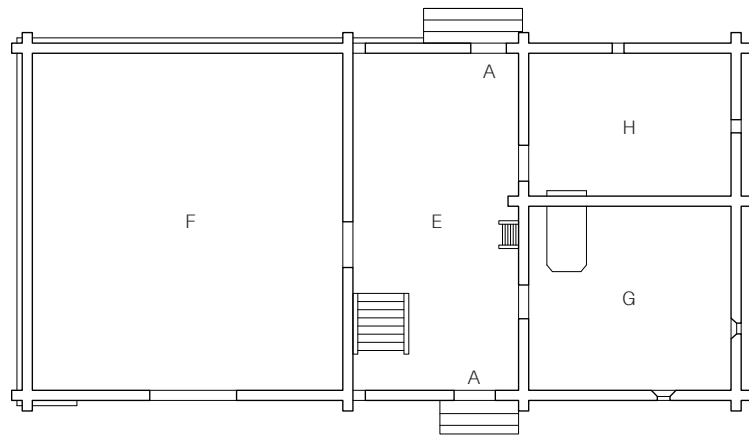
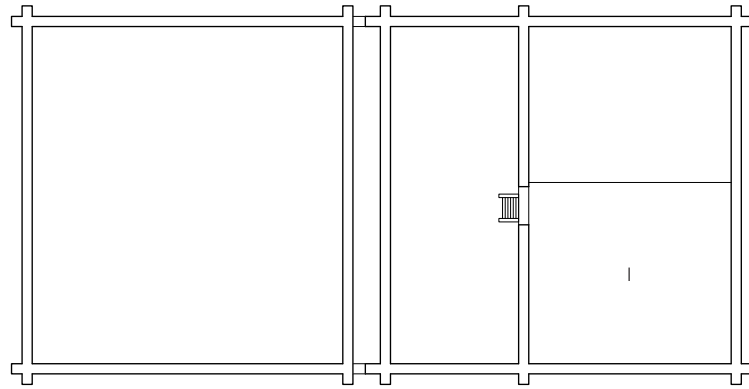
ality a simple hearth (*cendré*) located at the centre of the room, without any chimney for smoke evacuation, making it an hybrid with the smoke chamber solution. In other local examples of more complex organisation, the *streita* hosts also a bedroom²⁰. As common practice in the area, the *stüa mata* and the kitchen are oriented towards south. The two are linked through a small hole in the wall, so that from the kitchen it was possible to light up the stove heating the *stüa mata*, used also as a bedroom. On the upper floor, reachable through a ladder, there is an attic, locally called *krapéna*.

Construction

The Casa Vecchia is realised with larch wooden beams intertwined according to the *Blockbau* technique. The trunks are left in their circular section, with the exception of the ones defining the *stüa mata* that had to perform particularly efficiently in terms of insulation. The domestic and the rural body show a certain independence from one another as they seem to be finished in themselves and just put one next to the other²¹. They have been probably built in two different phases. Consequently, from outside the protruding logs already show the inner division. In this case the ridge almost perfectly coincide and the building conveys an idea of unity. Window openings are only present in the domestic part and are reduced to the minimum, with the consequence that the smoke was always permeating the kitchen. The covering is out of wooden shingles, stabilised with big stones, relying on a structure of wooden beams that recall the raft roof.

20 Ibid., 227.

21 Giovanoli, *Facevano Case. 1450-1950*, 67.



Basement, Ground Floor and Attic

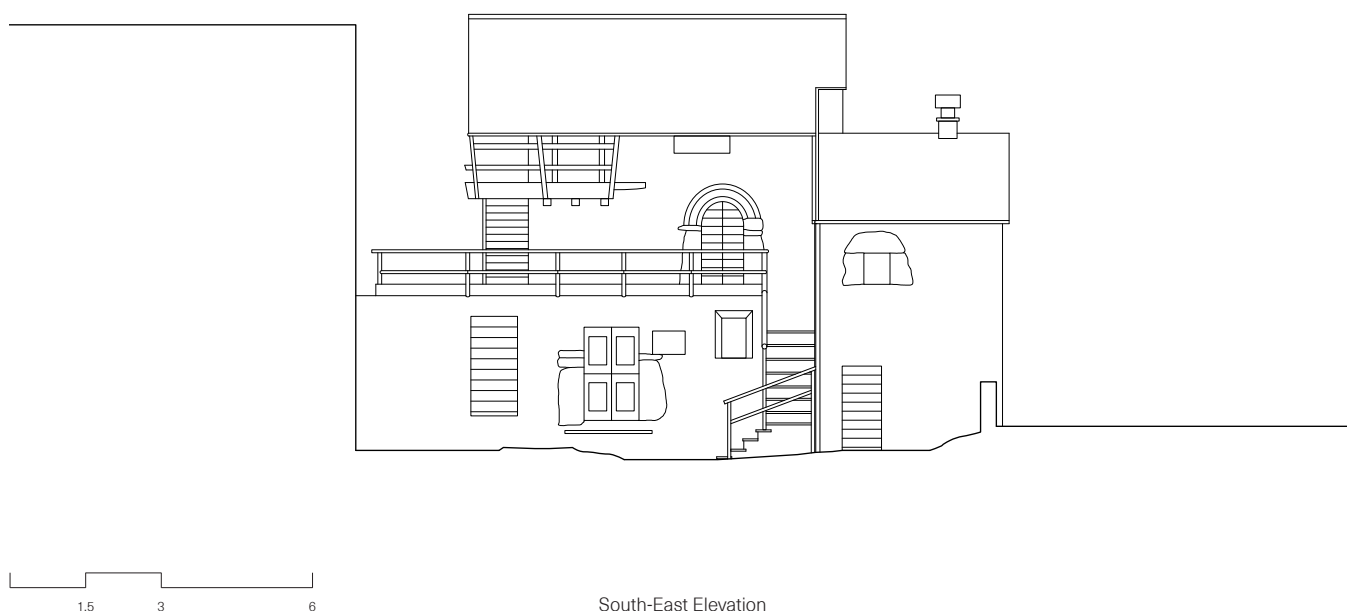


Casa Vaninetti

Via Pirondini 10b, I-23013 Sacco

15th Century

724 masl



Historical Notes

The village of Sacco is located on the Orobic side of the valley and has medieval origins. It flourished on an economical and cultural point of view between the 14th and 15th century, period in which the presence of important figures like artisans, merchants and notaries are attested²². Its importance was due to the fact that, before the opening of the St. Mark's Pass in the 16th century, the Val Gerola was crossed by one of the main routes connecting the Valtellina with the Republic of Venice. It is to this same period that the numerous frescoes on the façade of rural houses are dated: among those, there is one building that

stands out, that is Casa Vaninetti. Located within a courtyard, it is named after the fresco that depicts the *Homo Selvadeo*, the Wild Man, dated 1464²³. This is a topic common to the whole alpine area, regardless of geographical borders, testifying that this apparently isolated village was once open to foreign influxes.

Façade and Surroundings

Casa Vaninetti is a good example of rural dwelling within an Orobic village; in particular, it belongs to that group of rural medieval houses that underwent a substantial transformation in

22 Lurati et al., *Mondo Popolare in Lombardia. Sondrio e il suo Territorio*, 56.

23 Benetti, *Dimore Rurali Medievali del Versante Orobico Valtellinese*, 250.



Siteplan

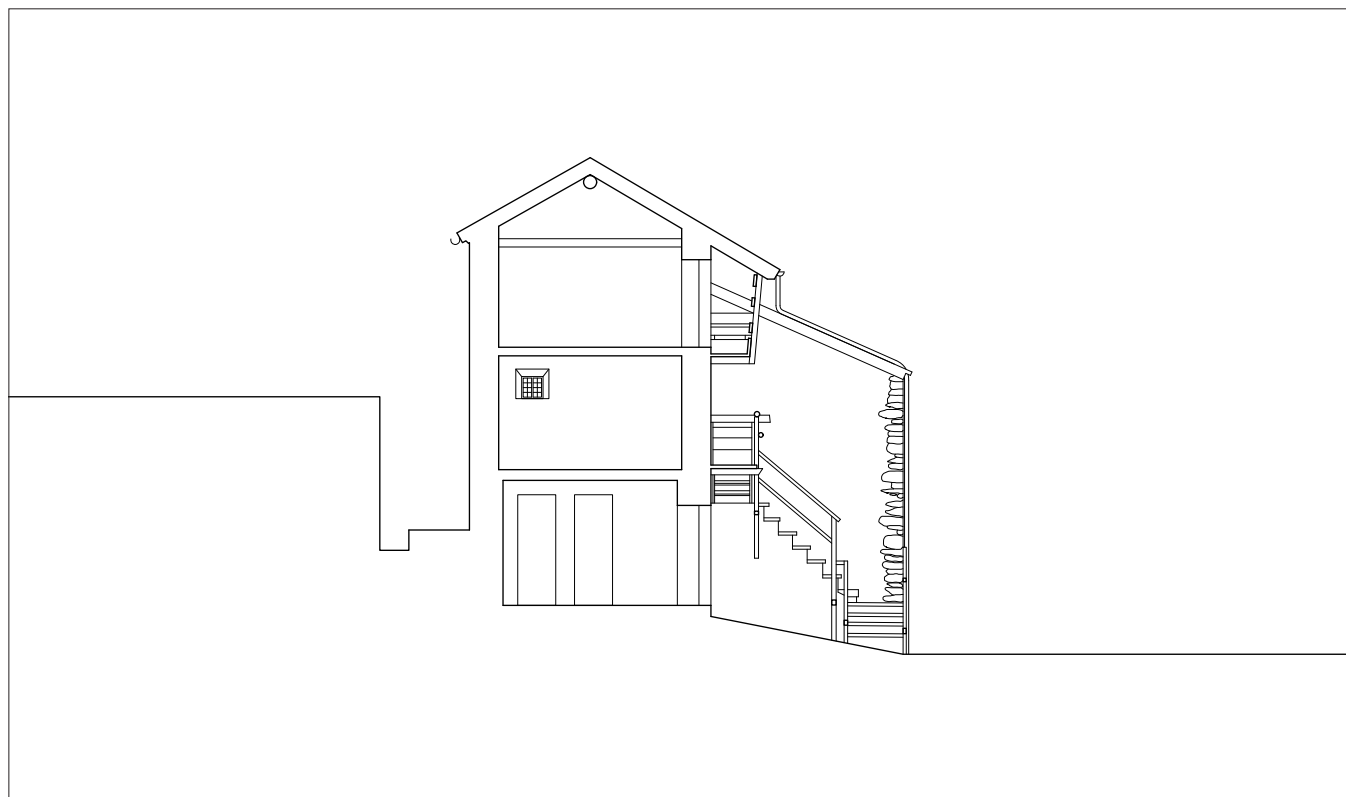


the 15th century. Two quadrangular volumes meet in a corner, so that the extension of two walls of the main building constitute two sides of the smaller one. The latter is a tower-house, with single-pitched roof and access on the ground floor. A similar joint, in that case between the main body and a fortified tower, is visible also in the plan of Palazzo Besta (see chapter *Palazzo*). The architectural language of the two bodies is identical: the stonework, left visible, hides the lime mortar, giving the impression of being a drystone wall. The thickness of the masonry is also the same. The complex gains unity also thanks to the presence of the outside stairs, that connect the two galleries of the upper floors by creating a continuous flow along the southern sides of the house. The whole circulation is protected by the

cantilever of the roof and the long balustrade allowed the drying of the corn cobs. Unlike Casa Tomé, the stairs have not been implemented in the house by closing the courtyard because it would have drastically reduced the south-exposed elevation. On the contrary, the main façade has been kept as it was in medieval times and embellished with plaster jambs, painted in the case of the portal.

Interior Organisation

The two volumes typologically work as a two-room house, even though the spaces are not one next to the other but offset. Seen the tight fabric of the village, the smaller volume may have been also added eventually to host rural activities. A similar example

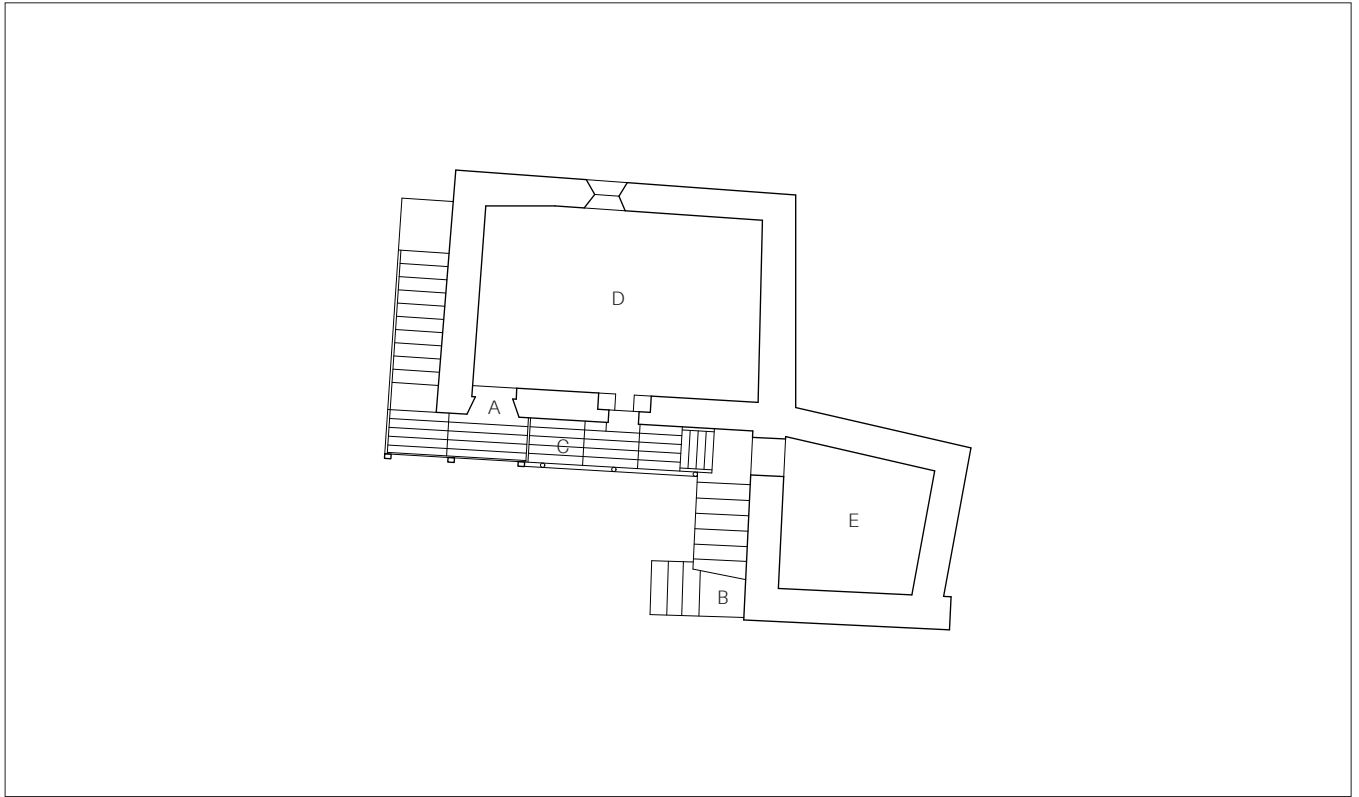


Section

can be observed in Casa Bianchi in Berbenno²⁴, where a farm annex (*masün*) is juxtaposed to the dwelling. Their roof shape also differs, being gabled for the main building and single-pitched for the other one. Similarly, in the Casa dei Paganini (see chapter *Tower*) a barn closes one of the sides of the courtyard. The very courtyard of Casa Vaninetti could in this sense still express the influence of the Po Valley's house, keeping domestic and rural activities separated as the Valtellina tradition wanted to. Nevertheless, with the loss of importance of Sacco the use of the spaces drastically changed: the ground floor of the largest volume, organised on three floors, was until a few years ago used as a stable, while the upper floor was a barn and the third floor was abandoned²⁵. These were certainly not the original destinations, otherwise it would not explain the presence of artistically relevant frescoes on the first floor. The absence of a chimney on the roof of the main building leads to the idea that the heating relied on a smoke chamber, seen that there are no traces of a *stüa* that would be in any case unusual for that time and this part of Lower Valtellina.

24 Benetti and Benetti, *Dimore Rurali di Valtellina e Valchiavenna*, 159.

25 Lurati et al., *Mondo Popolare in Lombardia. Sondrio e il suo Territorio*, 56.



First Floor



- A - Entrance
- B - Stone Staircase
- C - Gallery
- D - Frescoed Room
- E - Annex Building

Casa Castelmur

Strada Principale 92, CH-7603 Vicosoprano

1537

1065 masl



Historical Notes

Once one of the main routes between the Italian Peninsula and Central Europe passed through the Maloja and Septimer passes, already used in Roman times. Val Bregaglia and Valchiavenna were therefore in a strategic position and their main urban centres developed along these transit routes. Along the so-called Via Superiore there were rest stations at Chiavenna and Vicosoprano²⁶. In the latter, one can well observe a phenomenon that is also common to the Italian Val Bregaglia, namely the arrangement of the front of the houses inside a rectangular plot along the main street, with the entrance on the main façade and the back occupied by the service areas. This typology could

also be found in the most important village of the valley, Piuro, before it was destroyed by a landslide in 1618. In the mentioned village of Vicosoprano it is still possible to see the residences of local important families overlooking the main road. Among the others there is that of the Castelmur, whose construction dates back to the mid-16th century.

Façade and Interior Organisation

Casa Castelmur belongs to a typology whose development of the plan is already intuitable from the façade. In similar examples of stately homes, the pediment faces the street front: the main door is located in the middle and flanked by one or more

26 Giovanoli, *Facevano Case. 1450-1950*, 176.



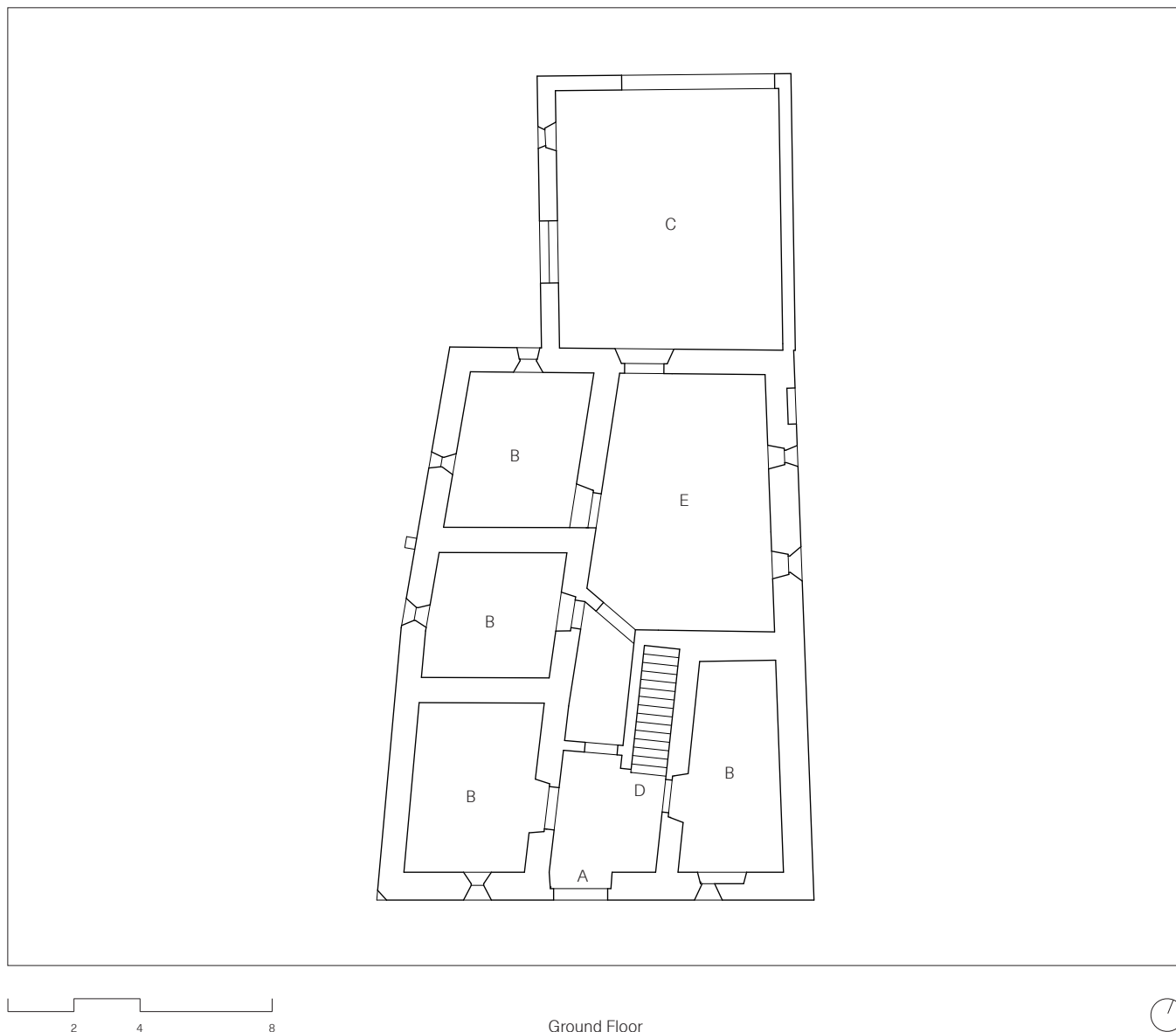
Siteplan



rows of windows. This typology of house, with a fixed internal circulation, appears in the Renaissance period²⁷ and from this moment on coexists with the outer-circulation rural house. In plan the portal corresponds to the inner central corridor, from which it is possible either to access the rooms on the side or to climb up the stone staircase. In Casa Castelmur there is a sort of covered courtyard at the end of the corridor, providing direct access to the stable. On the upper floors there are the bedrooms and the *stüe*, looking directly at the main street through two windows on the main façade, and accessible through a corridor, called *sulair*, located above the inner courtyard. The system *stüa*-kitchen is typical of Val Bregaglia and is

in this case quite similar to the one of Casa Tomé, with which it shares also a general organisation of the plan. Unlike the latter, Casa Castelmur is more comfortable in its dimensions and the outer surface is completely plastered. It is interesting to note that, while in Valtellina and Valchiavenna the portals were framed with stone, in the Casa Castelmur the profile of the door is simply frescoed and does not present any coherence with the classical dictates. This fact attests in first place that renaissance architecture is copied in its forms but not in its principles, and in second place it makes evident that locally two-dimensional decorations were more diffused than projecting elements like rustications and pilasters.

27 Giovanoli, *Facevano Case. 1450-1950*, 175.



Ground Floor

Comparison with Other Buildings

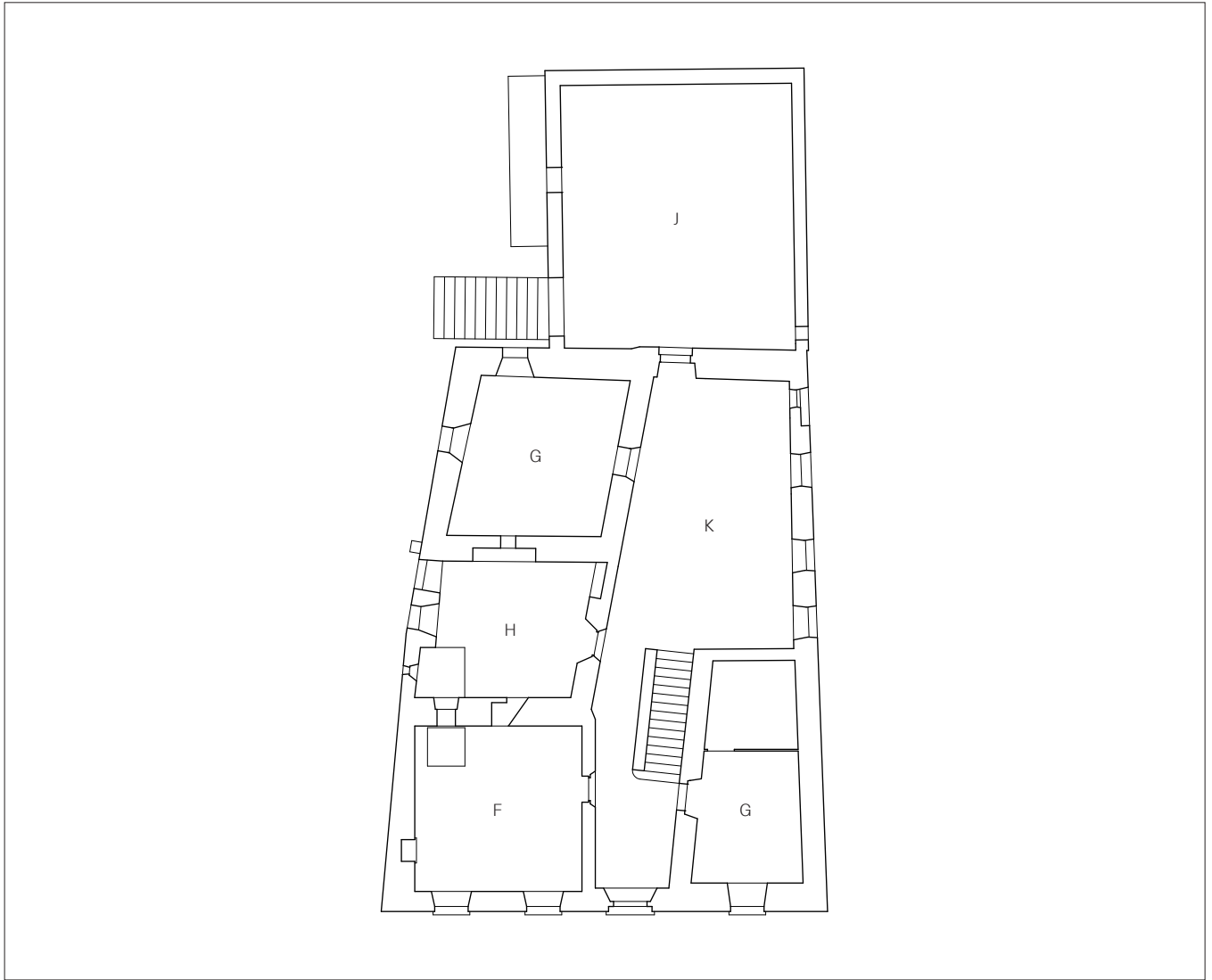
In the same period Biasca saw the construction of Casa Pallanda²⁸, that shows the same space and circulation layout within a more rigorous and geometrical plan. Also the windows of the ground floor are in the Ticinese example much closer to the ones that we find in Valtellina, while the ones of Casa Castelmur still retain the medieval funnel shape that can be seen for example also in the Abbey of St. John in Val Müstair. The Bregaglia example is more related to the type of the *Engadiner Haus* that starts to appear just beyond the Maloja Pass, like the Old Post

building²⁹ described by the Hunziker in Sils, a century older than Casa Castelmur but still retaining the same organisation. In Engadin the renaissance ideals had in fact a milder effect on architecture and are in fact always mediated through the local medieval heritage. This does not happened for example in the valley of Poschiavo, where the Casa di Antonio Landolfi³⁰ shows a similar inner organisation as Casa Castelmur but also an innovative and mature façade, more detached from the contemporary rural habitations and closer to the Italian examples. On the contrary, Casa Castelmur seeks its language north of the Alps.

28 Francesco Chiesa, *La Casa Borghese nella Svizzera. Cantone Ticino: il Sopraceneri* (Locarno: Armando Dadò Editore, 1984), 30.

29 Hunziker, *La Maison Suisse. Troisième Partie: Les Grisons*, 13.

30 Giovanoli, *Facevano Case. 1450-1950*, 121.



First Floor



- A - Entrance
- B - Cellar (*Canva*)
- C - Stable
- D - Staircase
- E - Courtyard (*Curt*)
- F - *Stüa*
- G - Bedroom
- H - Kitchen (*Chiesa del Fôc*)
- J - Deposit
- K - *Sulair*

The grete tour, that was so thikke and stroong,
Which of the castel was the chief dongeoun (...)
Was evene joynant to the gardyn wal.

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: William Caxton, 1476).

Tower

A Problem of Type

Tower is a very generic term to indicate buildings that, even they may resemble each other in outer appearance and inner disposition, have nonetheless different origin and destination. That of fortified medieval architecture is for example an important topic to deepen when considering housing typologies because it had a strong influence on civil architecture¹. Talking about the case of the Grisons, Simonett does not make a distinction between the house-fort and the vertical house, even though they are two distinct types. Gschwend is, on the other hand, aware of the influx of the stately tower in Ticino but does not tackle the problem², citing only the Torre dei Pedrini in Chironico, whose height is well beyond the three-storey building that Simonett defines with a generic “tower house”. That said, the scarce examples left in the Italian Rhaetia and their common cultural background allow to make a single analysis of the topic without overlooking the differences. In order to do so, they must be distinguished three types of tower buildings, to which roughly correspond three distinct social classes.

Castle

The first type (fig. 27) is what commonly called a castle, a countryside fortification. As it will be better explained (see chapter *Palazzo*), the typology of the private palace didn't exist before the 14th century. Old-lineage nobles were usually living in castles located outside the city centre, from which they could exploit their feudal rights on the surrounding lands. Talking about castles in Valtellina refers to a stone tower encircled by a stone

wall, according to models that are repeated with the same dimensions along the valley and that had a particular success in the 13th century³. The side dimensions vary from the 4 metres of the tower of Caiolo to the 11 metres of Castionetto and Promontogno⁴. Similar proportions characterise also the towers of the Canton of Ticino⁵. Sometimes it happened, as in the case of the village of Castello dell'Acqua, that the presence of a castle became a pole of attraction that originated a urban tissue, while in other case the tower surrounded by a fence was used to protect the livestock (e.g. Castello di Mancapane near Sondrio).

House-Fort

The second type (fig. 28) regroups urban towers, also known as house-forts. In the Late Middle Ages the most prominent families of a village or a city provided to the construction of house-forts in order both to defend themselves and to affirm their power. The situation was somehow similar in the Italian Rhaetia: in fact at the beginning of the 16th century, many Rhaetian villages saw their rooftop landscape crowded with towers, even though it is hard for us to imagine so, seen the scarcity of examples left. Among others, Bormio was thought to have 32 towers⁶. Interestingly, unlike Italian communes, these towers were sometimes also inhabited by wealthy farmers when the nobles preferred to remain in their castles⁷. In some cases the whole village surrounding the tower was working as a fortification, as in the example of Mazzo⁸. Within the Canton of Grisons house-forts are mostly found in the southern valleys⁹, sign that this typology was probably imported from the plains of Lombardy. Zuoz had

1 Benetti and Benetti, *Dimore Rurali di Valtellina e Valchiavenna*, 42.

2 Max Gschwend, *La Casa Rurale nel Canton Ticino. Volume II*, trans. Orlando Pampuri and Arnaldo Rivola (Basel: G. Krebs, 1982), 15.

3 Della Misericordia, Rao and Baruta. “Il Paesaggio Nobiliare: Castelli, Torri e Palazzi fra Medioevo ed Età Moderna.”

4 Guido Scaramellini, “Le Fortificazioni in Valtellina, Valchiavenna e Grigioni” (Museo Castello Masegra, 2004), 6.

5 Christiane De Micheli Schulthess, “Fortificazioni del Canton Ticino: Inventario e Indagini Preliminari,” *Mittelalter* 12, no. 2 (2007): 43.

6 Scaramellini, “Le Fortificazioni in Valtellina, Valchiavenna e Grigioni,” 7.

7 Simonett, *Die Bauernhäuser des Kantons Graubünden. Band I*, 101.

8 Benetti and Benetti, *Dimore Rurali di Valtellina e Valchiavenna*, 42.

9 Simonett, *Die Bauernhäuser des Kantons Graubünden. Band I*, 101.

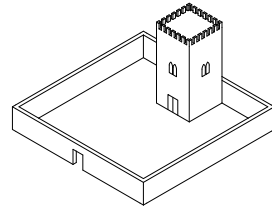


Fig. 27 - Castle

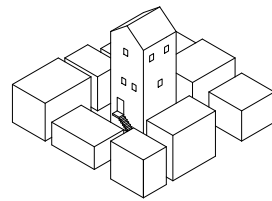


Fig. 28 - House-Fort

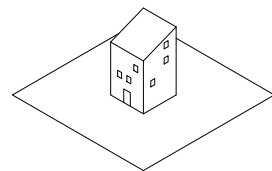


Fig. 29 - Tower-House

for example up to 20 towers¹⁰. This typology is in general very thin, with the side dimension between 3 and 6 metres; only rarely it does have a bigger footprint. The entrance is often raised from the ground, in order to make it better defensible in case of attack: the access happened through a movable wooden staircase. A point in common with the rural house is the angle, reinforced by regular ashlar, as well as the stone framing of the windows; differently, the façade is usually partially plastered and there is a bigger use of mortar.

Tower-House

The third type taken into consideration is not a noble mansion but a rural home, whose dwellers are peasants and farmers. It is what we can call a vertical house (fig. 29), simply composed by the stacking of rooms one on top of the other, starting from the heated room on the ground floor. It is a common form of organisation in those areas that made wide use of stone as building materials, among which Italian Rhaetia and the Canton of Ticino are included. Every floor hosts a single room, that may be squared or rectangular. The entrance, unlike the previous typology, is at ground level; circulation is still located outside, another point of difference with the previous two types, and composed of wooden galleries and staircases. In particular the stacking of functions, rather than their horizontal spreading, granted a more efficient use of the heat produced in the kitchen, above which the sleeping rooms are placed. Together with the housing purpose, they could provide some sort of protection in case of danger (e.g. Roccolo in Bioggio): for this reason some were also used as storage places (e.g. Cà di Risc in Torre di Santa Maria). The roof is usually single-pitched and openings are reduced to the minimum, as can still be seen in a medieval house in Brusio¹¹. These towers were of modest dimensions and pre-

valently made of stone, rarely overpassing the height of three floors. Examples of wooden tower houses are attested, but the basement is always out of stone. The tower-house is one oldest form of dwelling of Valtellina, from which more complex organisations originated. The union of more tower-houses is what constitutes the abandoned village of Scilironi in Val Malenco, and gave also origin to multi-family houses that shared the wooden gallery and profited from the mutual closeness.

The Conversion Process

At the end of the medieval period some buildings of the first two typologies were converted into stately homes¹²: these processes of modification sometimes completely altered the original layout, making it almost unrecognisable (as in the case of the surviving tower of Palazzo Besta), while in others it is still visible because the tower configuration has been kept (e.g. Casa Alta in Soglio). The following examples are all located in inhabited centres, testifying that the phenomenon of conversion occurred more often for those building located not too far from an inhabited centre. It must be also remembered that in a turbulent area like Rhaetia, where lot of armies and peoples were passing by, towers located in strategic positions continued to be used as strongholds as long as the 16th century. There was in fact great abundance of such in Valtellina¹³, even if very few have survived until today and none in its original condition. This is due to the destruction of the fortifications in the valley operated in 1526 by the Grisons, who were frightened by the possibility of a revolt. What remained was eventually destroyed in 1639 as decided in the Treaty of Milan. The ruins of some of the numerous signal towers scattered along the valley can still be visited today, some of which are completely incorporated into the vegetation (such as the Turiseül between Cedrasco and Fusine¹⁴).

10 Constant Wieser, "Von Mittelalterlichen Zuoz," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 1047, no. 15 (April 1956): 9.

11 Giovanoli, *Facevano Case. 1450-1950*, 110.

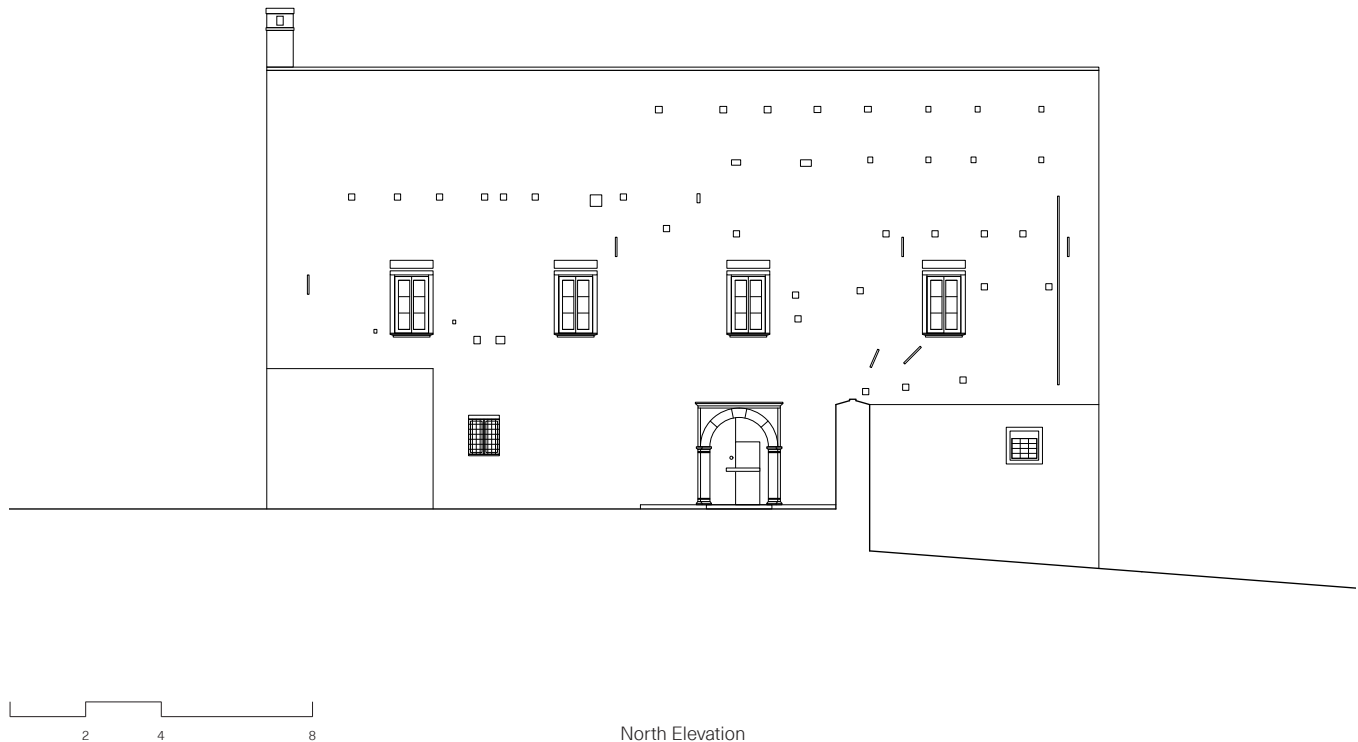
12 Origi et al., *Cultura del Costruire e dell'Abitare in Valtellina*, 25.

13 Giacomo Carlo Bascapé and Carlo Perogalli, *Torri e Castelli di Valtellina e Valchiavenna* (Sondrio: Banca Piccolo Credito Valtellinese, 1966), 14.

14 Benetti, *Dimore Rurali Medievali del Versante Orobico Valtellinese*, 157.

Castello Paribelli

Via Torre 9, I-23010 Albosaggia
11th-17th ct.
501 masl



Historical Notes

The first tower taken into consideration as case study is located in Albosaggia, not far from Sondrio. This village represents an exception as regards the presence of noble residences in Valtellina¹⁵. The actual owner of the building, the Paribelli family, was in fact one of the few awarded with the feudal diploma of the Holy Roman Empire. Since 1584, when the Carbonera nobles sold the mansion and moved to Sondrio, it has remained property of the Paribelli, who continued to live there until the middle of the 20th century and still use it as summer residence. At the same time the Castello Paribelli, so called because it evolved into a fully fortified residence, is one of the rare exam-

ples of aristocratic buildings on the Orobian side of the Alps, more shady and cold than the opposite Rhaetic Side. The presence of a stream not far away proves the wise choice of the site, since a water source could be crucial in case of siege. The name of the tower was in fact *Torre di Torzone*, a misspelling of the name of the nearby creek, the Torchione.

From the Tower to the Mansion

Castello Paribelli is typologically relevant because it developed around a tower of medieval origin (12th century), perhaps the only element datable to that period of the entire complex. It therefore represents a way of reusing and completing a defen-

¹⁵ Origgi et al., *Cultura del Costruire e dell'Abitare in Valtellina*, 25.

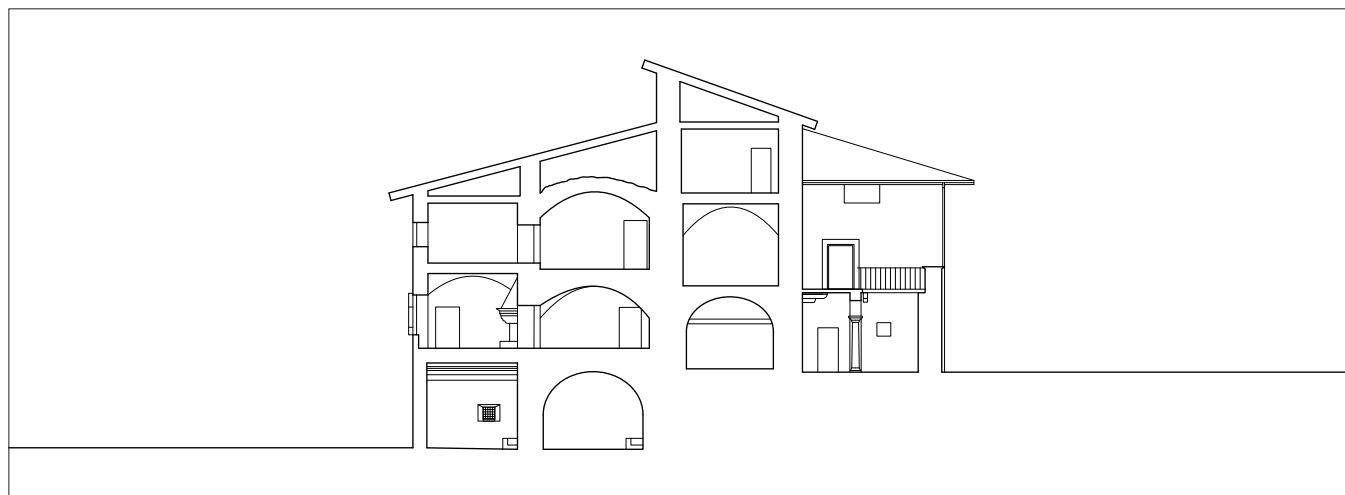


sive building for residential purposes and it is the only medieval tower in Valtellina still inhabited. The plan of the building grew by the gradual side-adding of spaces, according to the needs of the time and of the owner, around the original squared tower. A similar phenomenon can be observed in a house in Tinizong, Graubünden, on the route to the Julier Pass¹⁶. The first modifications of the tower saw the plan transformed into a real fort, that in the 16th century became a civil dwelling. Further modifications in this sense are to be attributed to the Carbonera family: it should be noted that this period was particularly fruitful regarding the conversion of towers and house-forts into civil residences. A chapel was added to the complex and decorated with a re-

naissance portal in green stone dated 1558. The building got its current appearance after the settlement of the Paribelli family, who made other changes to adapt it to their needs. The chapel was likewise enlarged and modified in 1621 in order to make it the burial monument of the family.

Façade and Surroundings

The access to the complex is located at the end of a cul-de-sac street and is marked by a gate within the surrounding wall. Once entered, the visitor finds himself in a garden, whose slope provides the space for the cellars and the stables on the west side of the building. The main entrance, with a stone arched portal,



Section

A - Atrium
B - Cellar Staircase
C - Deposit
D - Courtyard
E - Summer Hall
F - Staircase
G - Stüa

H - Corridor
I - Bedroom
L - Kitchen
M - Gallery

is located on the north façade, looking directly at the Malenco Valley and at the Bernina Range. This façade is flat, in order to get as much light as possible, and its stone-masonry sobriety still keeps the traces of its previous defensive function. Walking around the prismatic perimeter of the castle its aspect becomes more gentle and house-like, especially on the south-east façade near the chapel. Stone architraves and sills delimit horizontally the windows, while some of them have a plastered frame around. By looking at the complex from far it is possible to appreciate the diversity of the plan through the different slopes of the roofs: in particular the lean-to roof of the old tower, that still sticks out of the building block, realised after the tower lost its crenellation¹⁷.

Interior Organisation

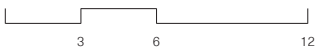
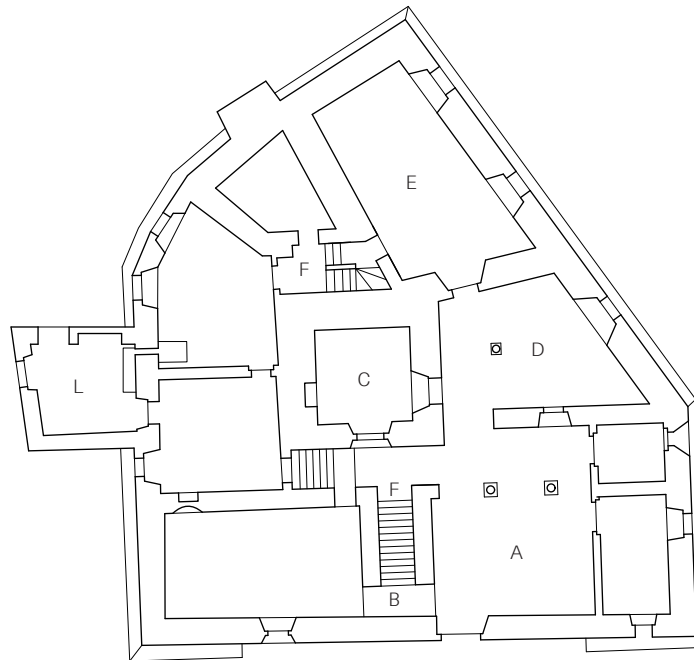
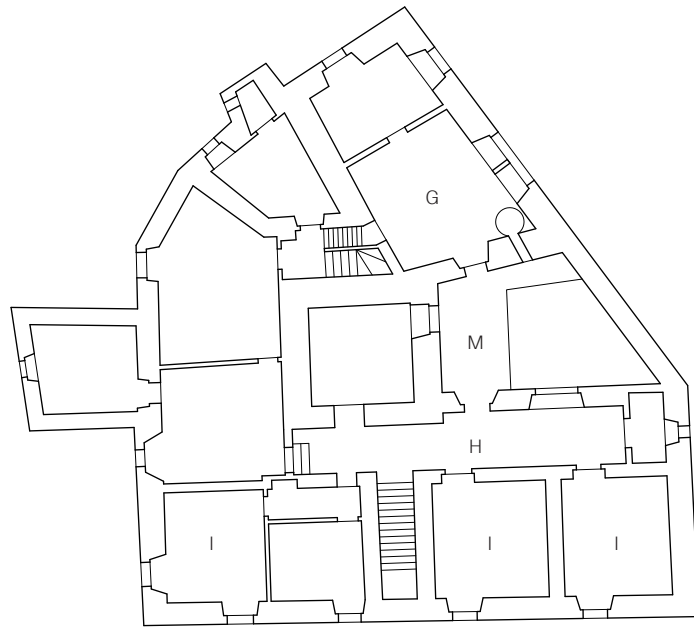
Once inside the mansion, a vaulted atrium welcomes the visitor, who could once enter directly with its horse. From this point it is possible either to reach the cellars through a staircase or to proceed towards the small inner courtyard, that grants access to

the summer hall on the south-west side. The vertical circulation is positioned north and south of the tower, whose thick walls constitute the nucleus around which the rooms of the house are disposed. The perspective view usually created by enfilade spaces is broken by the round articulation of the plan. Only on the northern side of the first floor a simple corridor provides access to the bedrooms. The house must have been particularly dark and cold, especially in winter, and it is no surprise that a southern façade does not really exist, since it would have been almost always privy of light. The same problem happened in the tower, that for this reason only hosts secondary functions: in the ground floor it is used as a deposit space.

The most important space of the mansion is undoubtedly the *stüa*, located above the summer hall and clad with Swiss pine wood¹⁸. This space was realised in the 16th century and its heated up by a soapstone *pigna*, a stove. In fact it was crucial for the prestige of the Paribelli family to have a representative space after having received the diploma of nobility from Rodolfo II in 1581 and a *stüa* was well suited for the task.

¹⁷ Giuseppe Ruttico, "Opere di Restauro del Castello Paribelli in Contrada Torre" (Historical Report and Register, Comune di Albosaggia, 1997), 8.

¹⁸ Ibid., 9.



Ground and First Floor

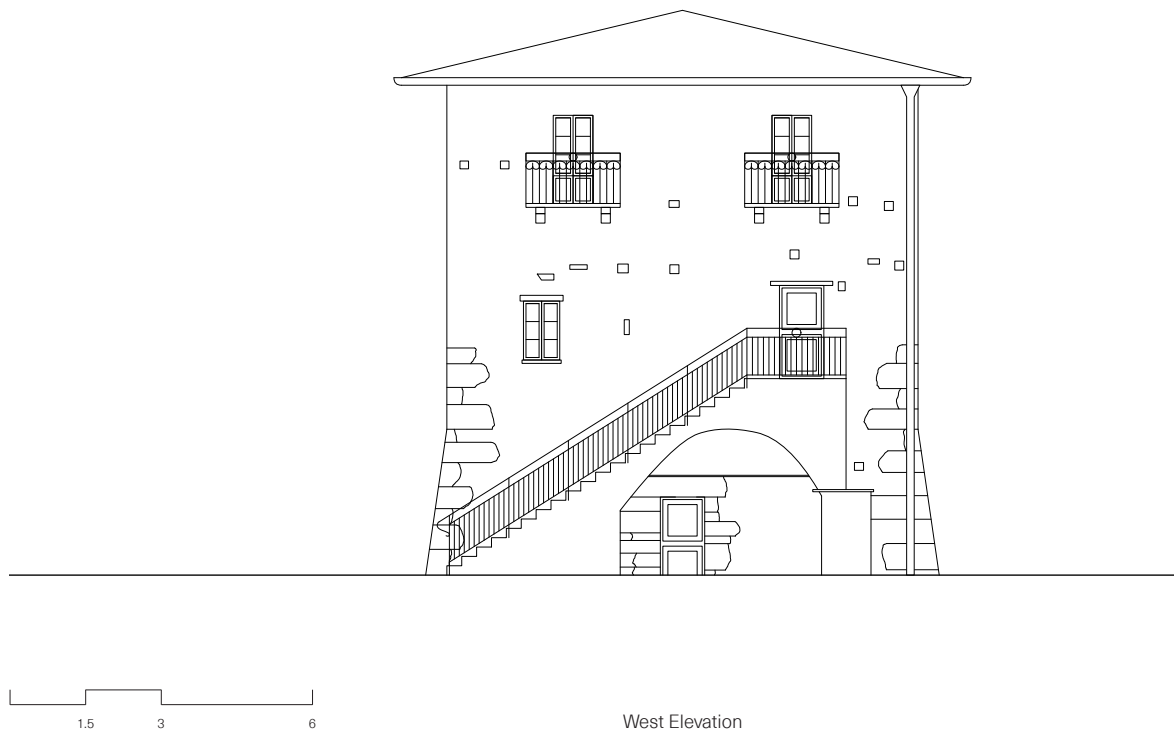


Torre dei Da Pendolasco

Via San Fedele 52, I-23020 Poggiridenti

14th Century

546 masl



Historical Notes

The position of the Torre dei Da Pendolasco was strategic because located on a relief, the Dosso Boisio, on the Rhaetic side of the Alps, which allowed a wide view over the valley and towards the three fortifications of Sondrio. It was not an isolated case, as many watchtowers of this type were present in Valtellina, of most of which remain not more than ruins. The Torre dei Da Pendolasco is therefore an important example, although its historical vicissitudes remain mostly unknown. The name of the tower may come from Antoniolo Domenico Da Pendolasco¹⁹, who wanted to provide himself of a safe refuge where

to be sheltered during the conflicts between Guelphs and Ghibellines in the 15th century. After being abandoned, it is known that the tower was bought by Giovanni Andrea Sermondi, who was responsible for its extension in 1560²⁰, adding a floor to the building and proving that it was used for permanent residential purposes at that time. They wouldn't be explained otherwise the pictorial decorations and the attention to its embellishment, unusual for a military tower. It must be born in mind that is exactly in this period that the major modifications of medieval-heritage buildings took place, by will of many noble families of the valley, as already seen with the Castello Paribelli.

19 Federica Prandi, "Aggiunte a *La Casa della Torre di Pendolasco*," *Bollettino della Società Storica Valtellinese*, no. 53 (2000): 114.

20 Federica Prandi, "La Casa della Torre di Pendolasco," *Bollettino della Società Storica Valtellinese*, no. 52 (1999): 67.



Siteplan



Façade and Surroundings

The complex consisted of the tower and of the surrounding land, bounded by a high wall that was later destroyed. This typology is well attested in Valtellina, as already affirmed in the introductory chapter. In the courtyard there was a well, then buried, which confirms the defensive function of the building, since the abundance of water sources in the village did not justify the presence of a cistern. The Rogna creek flows in fact not far from the tower. The raised access at 4 metres above ground level made it easy to withdraw the wooden staircases that gave access to the upper floors, providing an additional guarantee of defence. Probably already in the 16th century, when it was

converted into a house, there was no need of such a device. Nowadays the access to the first floor is provided by a stone staircase. The four corners of the façade are characterised by the presence of big granite ashlars, alternately extending of either side, whose construction recalls the traditional stonework of the area (fig. 7). The lower part is also slightly inclined in order to grant an even better stability to the building. Poorly-worked stones are used as infill to compose the walls, up to 2 metres thick on the ground floor, in a similar way as can be observed in the tower of Castionetto di Chiuro²¹, dating to the same period. Unlike the latter, there are no traces of the arched windows of medieval origin. Numerous putlog holes indicate the presence

of wooden galleries in the upper floors, later replaced by stone balconies. The original condition of the roof is unknown: the presence of a crenellation cannot be proved, and if it ever existed it had already disappeared in the 17th century²², substituted by a pyramidal roof made of stone slabs. A similar solution has been adopted also for the towers of Castel Masegra and of Palazzo De Simoni²³. If considering civil buildings, this feature is quite rare, but it is well suitable for a squared buildings where there isn't a strong orientation of the spaces. A solution of this type can be found for example in a tower-house in Rasa, Canton of Ticino²⁴. If analysed by its mere outer appearance, the Torre dei Da Pendolasco is in fact closer to a tower-house rather than a castle, sign that the border between typologies was often blurred and tended to move with the change of affectation.

Interior Organisation

One of the first description of the building dates to the 17th century and cites the cellar, above which there were two rooms, a hall and an attic (*spazachà*)²⁵. There was no *stüa* at that time, sign that this room was not yet diffused among the local aristocracy of Valtellina, unlike what happened among the Grisons rulers. Evident signs of the high degree of sophistication of the owners were nonetheless present: a frescoed room depicts frames of classical architecture enclosing the representation of the *Triumphs* by Petrarca, showing that the fresh wave of Renaissance ideals have been able to penetrate also the older medieval architecture. These decorations have probably been realised at the end of the 16th century, after the acquisition of the tower by the Sermondi family²⁶, whose efforts of refurbishment of the ruined building had limited impact on the outside. In fact the contrast between the austerity of medieval fortifications and the graciousness of the paintings was not a problem for the local elites, whose focus was always on the inside of their mansion where they would spent most of their time.

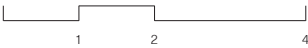
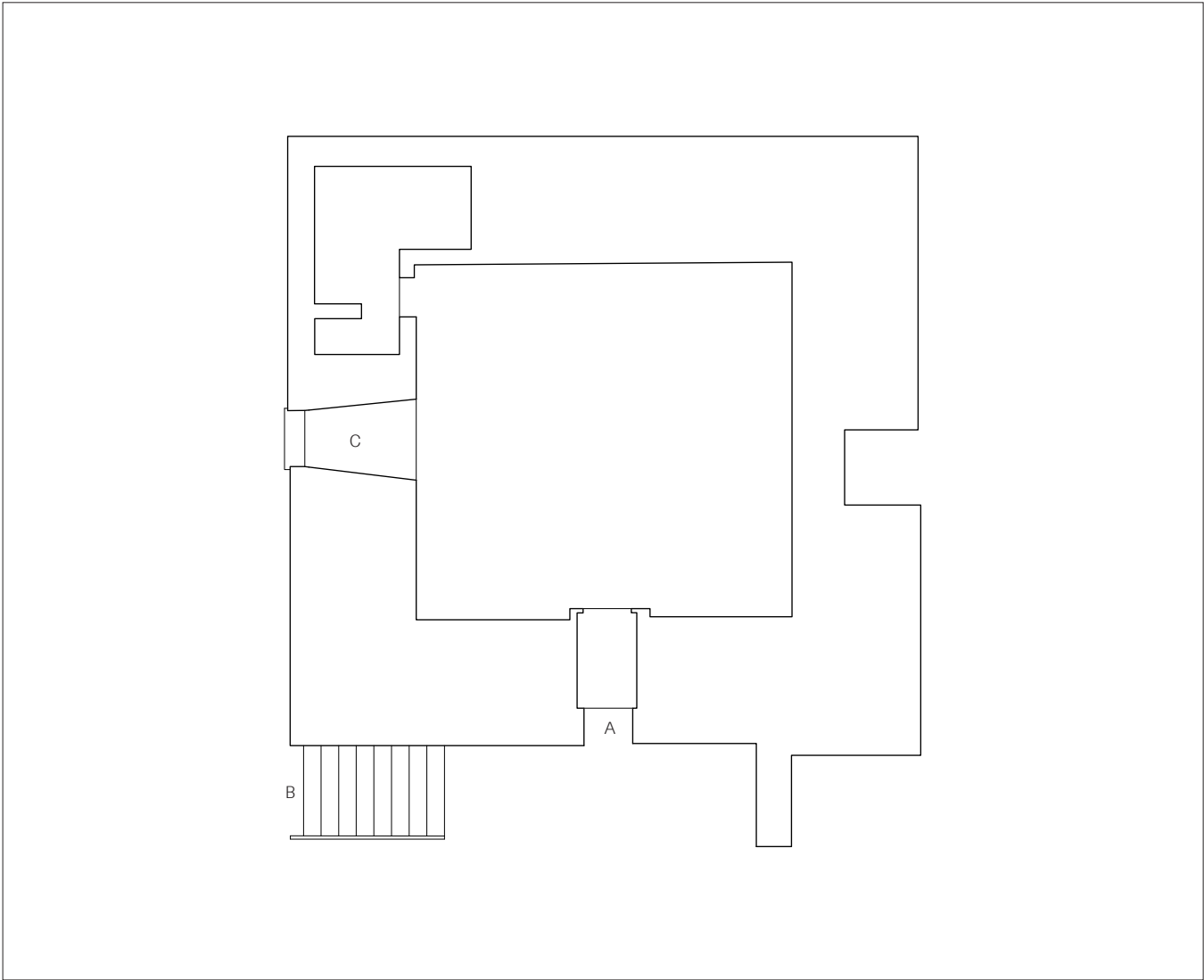
22 Prandi, "La Casa della Torre di Pendolasco," 81.

23 Negri et al., *Palazzi Signorili nella Rezia Italiana*, 323.

24 Rossi et al., *La Costruzione del Territorio nel Cantone Ticino*, 432.

25 Prandi, "La Casa della Torre di Pendolasco," 68.

26 Prandi, "Aggiunte a *La Casa della Torre di Pendolasco*," 118.



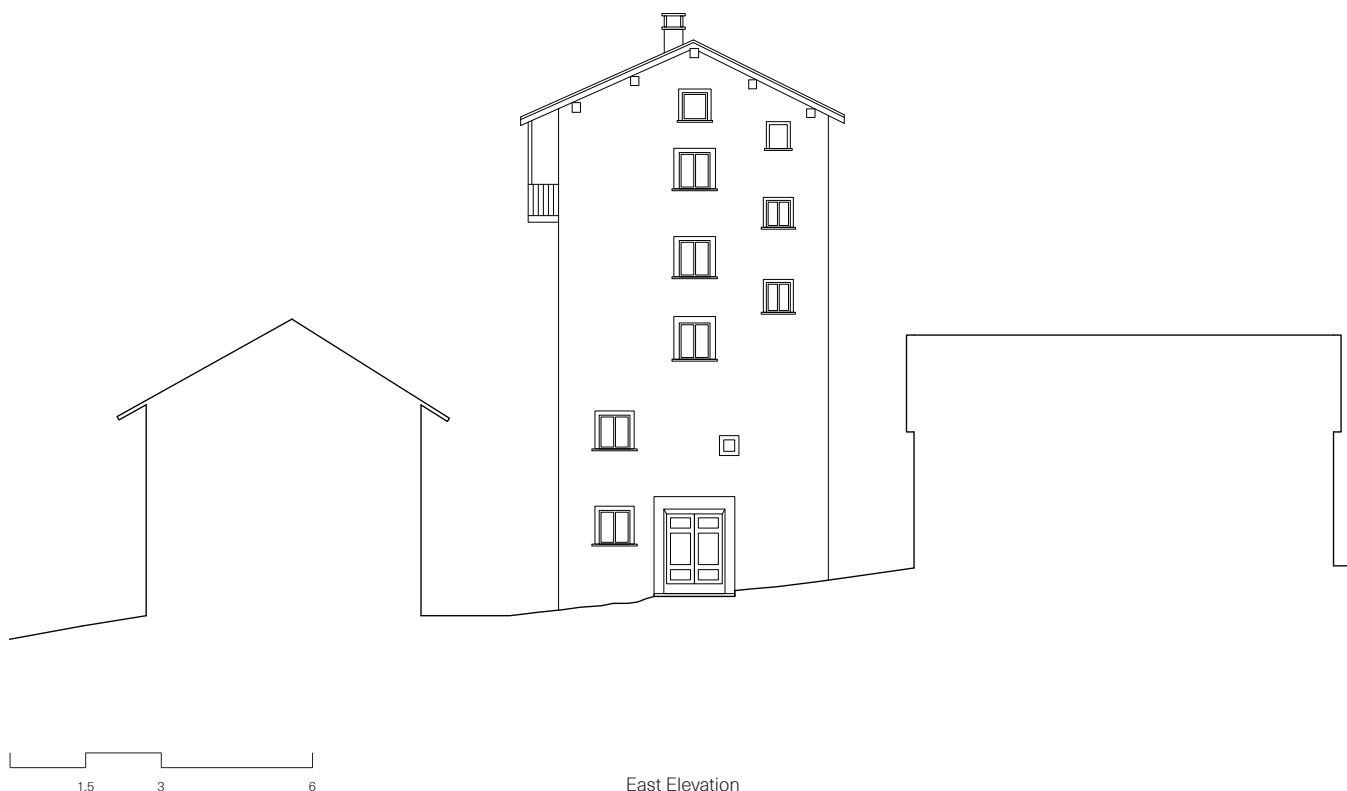
Ground Floor



- A - Entrance
- B - Staircase
- C - Funnel Window

Casa Alta

Plazza 1, CH-7610 Soglio
1524
1098 masl



Historical Notes

One of the best examples of the pure conversion of a medieval tower into a stately home, and one of the few of Italian Rhaetia, is the Casa Alta, situated in the centre of the village of Soglio in Val Bregaglia. Together with Casa Sker, another building belonging to the Salis family, it continued the medieval tradition of the house-fort in a period in which the horizontal development of the dwelling started to impose itself²⁷. Its position was nonetheless crucial for affirming the prestige of the Salis family, to whom the conversion of 1524 is attributed by the initials engraved on the ridge beam. Differently from other examples, who

have been cannibalised by the urban fabric and are at this point difficult to recognise, Casa Alta still shows clearly its tower-like volume: its height of 18 metres makes it recognisable in the roofscape of the village together with other residences of the mentioned Salis family. To imagine it in its primitive conditions we can look at the cited Torre dei Pedrini in Chironico, Canton of Ticino. This tower was initially not plastered, letting the stonework to be visible²⁸, and a wooden hoarding was anchored to the putlog holes visible on the 4th floor. Such elements are likely to have belonged also to the Casa Alta and would in case date the original tower to the 14th century.

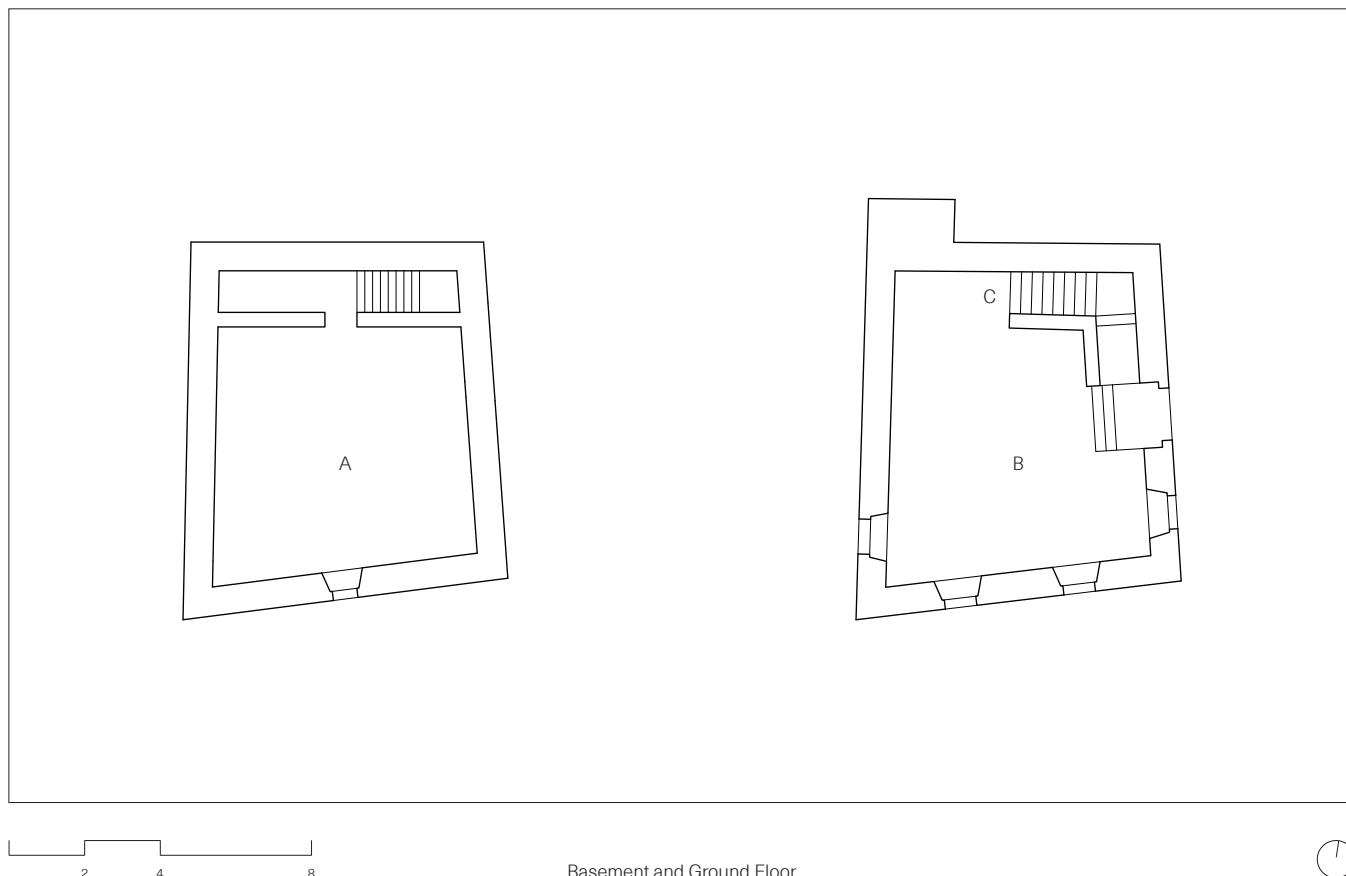
27 Letizia Scherini and Diego Giovanoli, *Palazzi e Giardini Salis a Soglio e a Chiavenna* (Chur: Verlag Bündner Monatsblatt, 2005), 69-70.

28 Swiss Castles, "Torre dei Pedrini."



The building is completely out of stone masonry, on which the gable roof beams rest. The covering is made of stone slabs. Unlike its original conditions, the tower is nowadays completely whitewashed, even though the stone blocks can be still perceived through some cracks in the plaster coating. The thickness of the walls, of around 80 centimetres, is constant through all the height of the building. The decision of hiding the rocky texture of the façade is due to the will of creating a visual difference between the stone houses of the peasants and the plastered buildings of the aristocracy²⁹. This phenomenon is typical of the Val Bregaglia and it was later adopted also for dwellings

29 Giovanoli, *Facevano Case. 1450-1950*, 176.



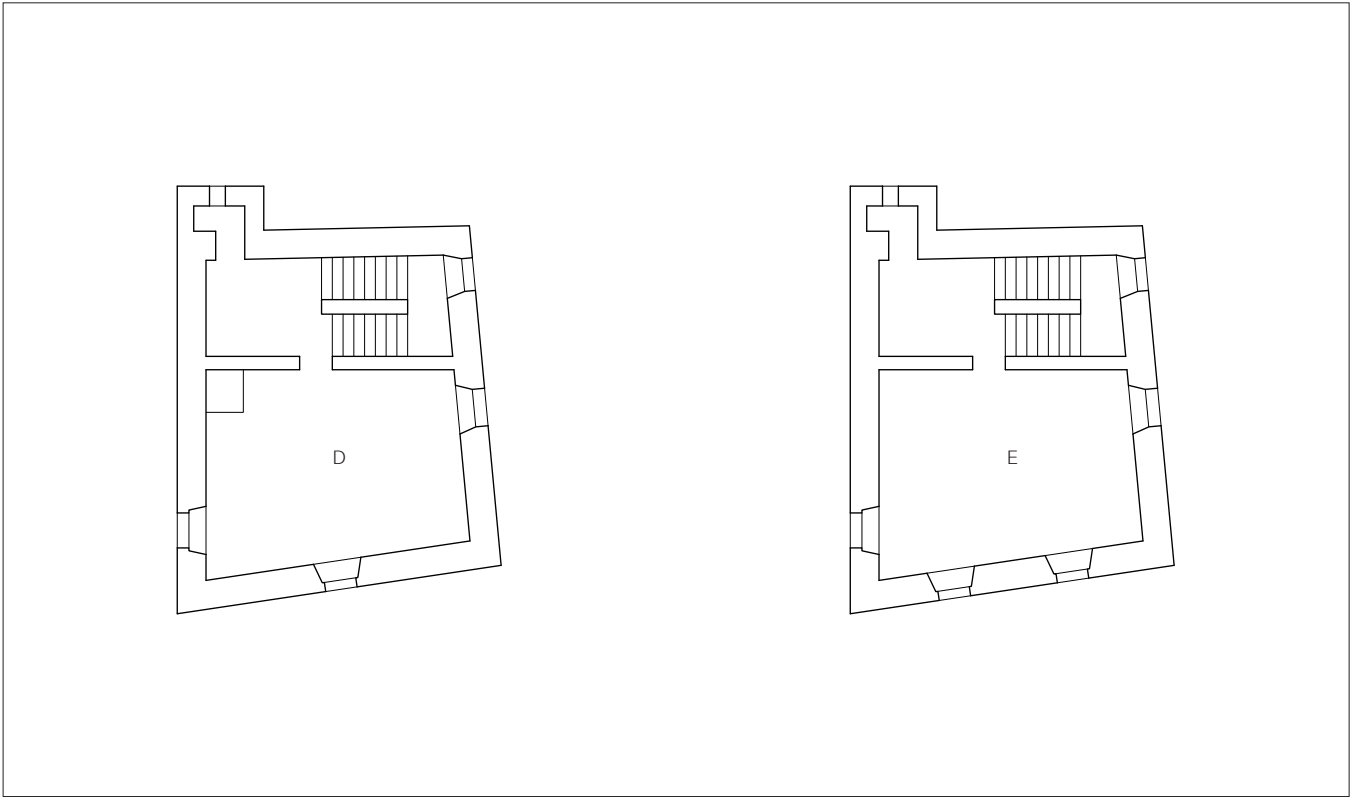
difficult to imagine its original configuration. The only trace left of the wooden galleries that probably cantilevered from the walls is a balcony on the last floor of the southern façade.

Interior Organisation

The change of affectation has modified the outer appearance of the building. Most likely the entrance to the tower was placed on the first floor, maybe on the west side where the annex was lately added. This theory could be supported by the fact that the actual entrance is strangely placed, almost cutting the staircase coming from the cellar. Moreover, the vaulted space of the atrium could correspond to the also vaulted ground floor present in tower-house, usually dedicated to rural activities. Despite these considerations, the original layout has probably been kept: the ground floor gives now access to a windowed space, whose openings are protected by grilles, while a corner staircase allows to reach the cellar floor or to go up to the upper floors. Each floor consists of a single room, so the functional distribution is developed in section and not in plan. On the first floor there was the kitchen, whose heat allowed to warm up the

second floor, followed by the living room and the by last two floors, used as bedrooms³⁰. First and second floor were lately transformed into *stübe*. In 1680 a further body was added to the west, which took benefit of the staircase of the main building. The irregularity in the positioning of the openings and their different size indicates the reuse of a pre-existence: in the annexe, in fact, the openings are more regular, as was the case in the construction of post-medieval buildings.

30 Scherini and Giovanoli, *Palazzi e Giardini Salis a Soglio e a Chiavenna*, 72.



Third and Fourth Floor



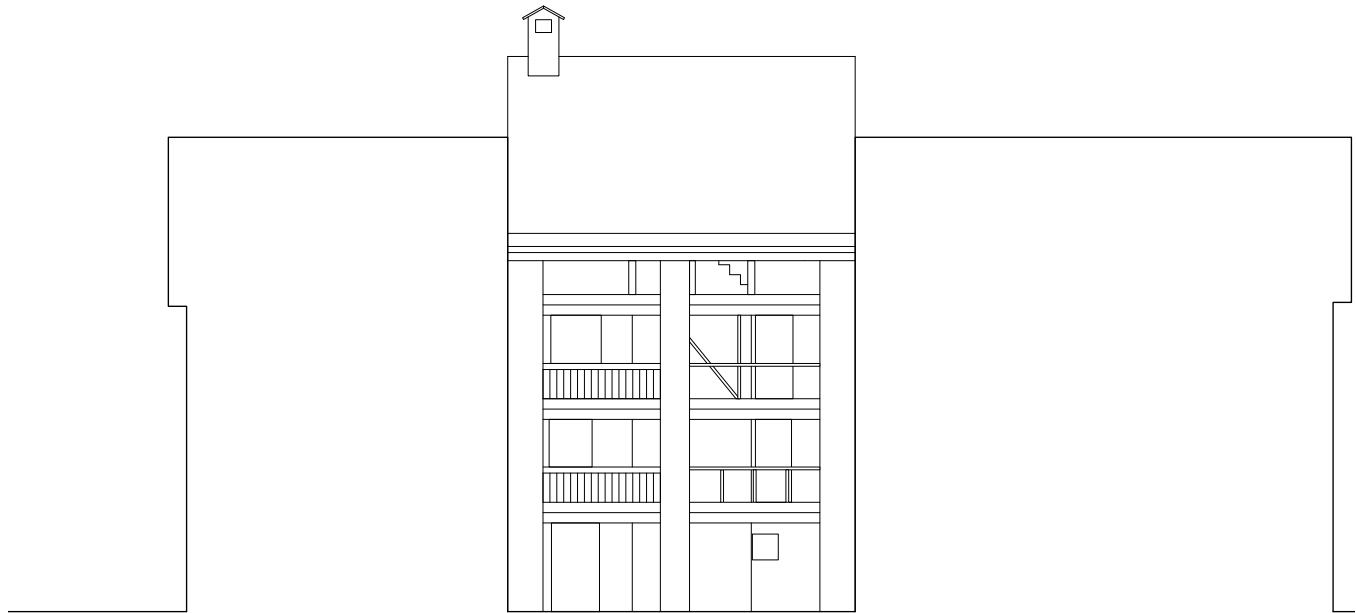
- A - Cellar
- B - Atrium
- C - Staircase
- D - Hall
- E - Bedroom

Casa dei Paganini

Via Giacomo Parascio 15, I-23014 Delebio

16th Century

236 masl



West Elevation

Historical Notes

Casa dei Paganini is one of the numerous buildings that once formed the nucleus of the village of Delebio, not far from Lake Como. The area of Lower Valtellina still received the influence of the centralised courtyard-dwelling³¹ typical of the Po Valley: for this reason the houses were organised around paved courtyards, locally called *culundéi*. These open spaces, usually closed on three sides, were connected to the main road of the village and formed a buffer, semi-public zone between the public street and the private dwellings. In the particular case of

the Paganini's Courtyard the central space assumed the function of barnyard and of common space of exchange. Within the protected central space all the productive activities could take place, thanks to the presence of a stable and of an oven on the ground floor. The Casa dei Paganini is one of the houses overlooking the homonym *culundéi* and it is a well-preserved example of an old medieval typology whose evolution had a great impact on both rural and palatial local architecture³². It has already been described as a tower-house, in the sense that also the Simonett intends it³³, so to say a dwelling constituted by the

31 Piefermi, "Le Dimore Rurali nelle Valli del Lario. Tipologie Abitative tra Alpi e Pianura," 286.

32 Rossi et al., *La Costruzione del Territorio nel Cantone Ticino*, 432.

33 Simonett, *Die Bauernhäuser des Kantons Graubünden. Band I*, 101.

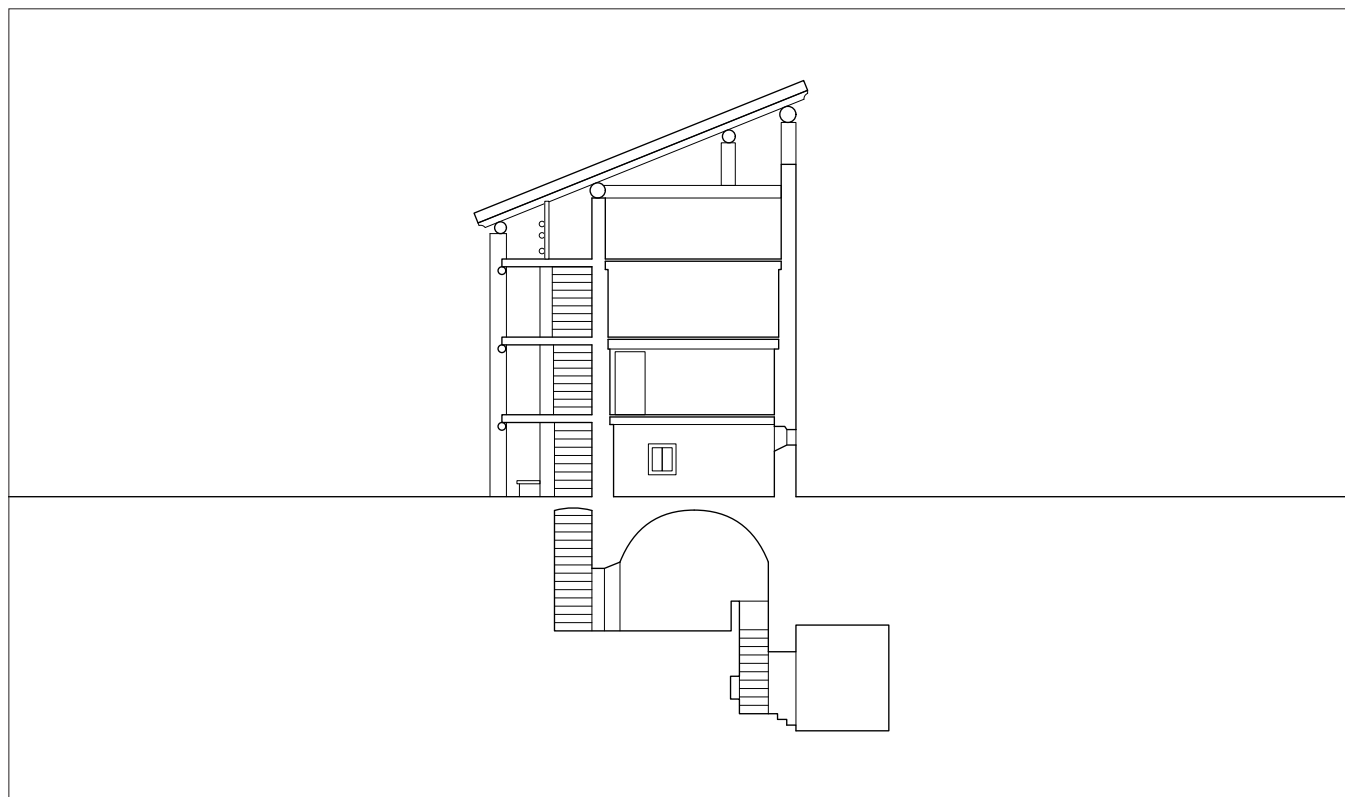


stacking of single rooms connected through an external circulation. From the 15th century this typology evolved to a dwelling of horizontal development³⁴; especially in the village of Delebio it is possible to see how this evolution process may have happened when many tower-houses were built one next to the other, making a logical solution the sharing of a longer gallery that could serve more rooms on the same level.

Façade and Surroundings

Unfortunately, the house does not exist anymore in its original state since it has undergone a massive refurbishment few years ago. Nonetheless, thanks to the help of photo-graphical

and written documentations, as well as through the analysis of some parts that luckily survived the intervention like the cellars, it is possible to reconstruct the original characteristics of the building. The overall dimensions of the house are remarkable, since it develops on four above-ground storeys and two underground ones, where the cellars are placed. It may be wrong to describe the west elevation as a real façade: it could be more appropriately defined as a sequence of intermediary open layers that protect the rooms. The first one is a very deep gallery, almost 3 metres wide, that constitutes the front of the house towards the courtyard and act as a circulation and as second buffer zone between the semi-public yard and the private rooms



Section

of the house. The second layer is formed by the staircase and its side wall, both made out of stone, while the galleries and the balustrades are out of wood: they were also used to hang and let dry the crops³⁵. To protect the gallery from the weather conditions the single-pitched roof continues its slope and leans on wooden trunks, sustained by the stone pillars that overlook the courtyard.

Interior Organisation

As said, the building is made by the stacking of squared rooms. Each storey has a single space that is sometimes used in entirety, as in the case of the ground floor where the kitchen is placed, or subdivided in two smaller units to house the bedrooms, as can be seen in the first and second floor. Both the underground cellars have a barrel vault ceiling, very common element in the tower-house typology that grants an efficient distribution of the forces, with the stonework left visible and hooks

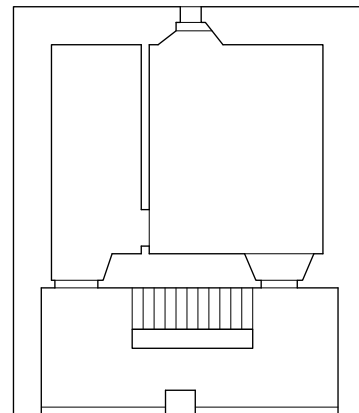
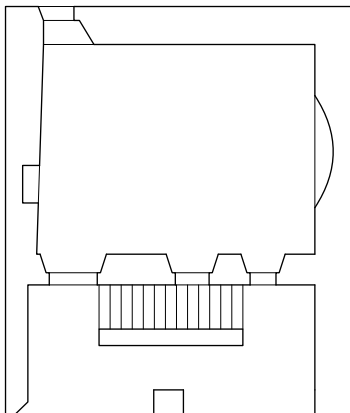
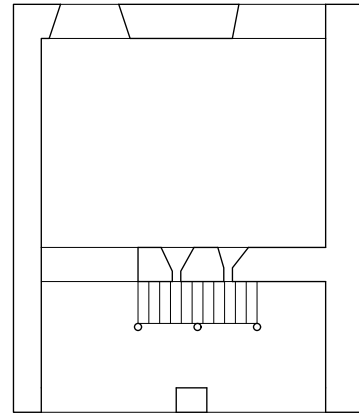
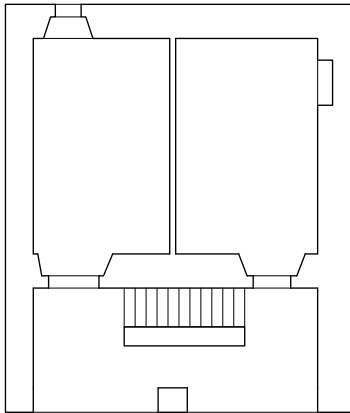
hanging from the ceiling. On the contrary the ground floor is not vaulted, probably a sign that it was built before the 15th century as it was the case of a similar house present in the village of Soglio³⁶. The upper floors are made of wooden planks laying on wooden beams that stick into a small recess that the wall presents at every storey. The kinds of wood used are chestnut, larch and spruce. Interestingly the last floor is occupied by the barn and a portion of the back wall is left open to let the air pass through, an element typical of rural houses but that was also present in Palazzo Besta before its restoration³⁷. Probably the roof was lately modified, either for the vertical extension of the house or for protecting the gallery, that initially may have been external. It is likely that the actual stone roofing was not the original one, that could have been out of shingles or stray, attested in the area according to recent studies³⁸ and present also in the Sottoceneri region in the Canton of Ticino.

35 Benetti and Benetti, *Dimore Rurali di Valtellina e Valchiavenna*, 141.

36 Giovanoli, *Facevano Case. 1450-1950*, 189.

37 Galletti and Mulazzani, *Il Palazzo Besta di Teglio: una Dimora Rinascimentale in Valtellina*, 43.

38 Della Misericordia, Rao and Baruta. "Il Paesaggio Nobiliare: Castelli, Torri e Palazzi fra Medioevo ed Età Moderna."



Ground, First, Second and Third Floor



Questi palagi e queste logge or colte
D'ostro di marmo e di figure elette,
Fur poche e basse case insieme accolte,
Deserti lidi, e sterili isolette.

Giambattista Felice Zappi and Faustina Maratti, *Rime dell'Avvocato Gio. Batt. Felice Zappi e di Faustina Maratti sua Consorte* (Naples: Giuseppe Cioffi, 1833).

Palazzo

From the Tower to the Palace

The term *palazzo* is the Italian word for palace and its willingly left untranslated because it refers to a typology that, in its modern forms, was born and developed in Italy, before spreading out all over Europe. Until the 14th century the Latin term *palatium* was only indicating the royal residences, the seat of the bishop or of the governor¹. The old aristocracy was mainly living in the countryside, where it could exploit its feudal rights, until the 15th century when cities became safer and more stable. At this point the nobles started to abandon their castles, whose protection they didn't need anymore, and moved to the urban centres² that had newly become culturally and economically appealing. They joined the elites already present in cities, whose equivalent to the castle was the house-fort. This inflow made necessary to erect houses adequate to the prestige of these families. The first mansions of this period still retained characters of fortification: towers were continued to be built within the urban centres but the coming of renaissance ideals brought a sensibility that required another architectural expression, far from the dark and frugal Gothic spaces. This new typology is the palace, soon taken up also by rich people, like merchants and bankers, as a mean to establish their social position.

The Case of Rhaetia

In Valtellina and Valchiavenna the renaissance palace represents the expression of the new taste adopted by some of the nobles, during a period in which people still continued to live in castles and house-forts. The heritage of the Middle Ages is not completely lost but translated into architectural elements like the chimneys, that became sort of miniatures of towers³. It is important to underline that the palace is not the result of

the simple evolution of the rural house but rather the fusion of some of its characteristics with models imported from outside. In the 14th century, as can be seen in the Palazzo Rurale of Pedemonte, some families tried already to aggregate several tower houses in order to obtain a bigger complex. The result was nonetheless closer to a rural house than a palace. What was missing was the new cultural wave that, from central Italy, arrived also in Valtellina thanks to its contacts with the Duchy of Milan. The Grisons were only marginally touched by it, at the point that nowadays there are no remarkable Renaissance palaces in the whole canton; despite this, some formal and utilitarian principles managed to influence the local architecture and gave origin to the type now known as *Engadiner Haus*.

The Specificity of Rhaetian Renaissance

Certain of the imported renaissance elements found fertile soil in the alpine architectural language, sometimes introducing innovative features and sometimes combining with existing practices. The fusion between the rustic arcades of Palazzo Cilichini in Chiuro⁴ and the lately superimposed elegant 15th-century loggia marks a smooth transition towards a new language. Credaro remembers how the Venosta family had "big and solid houses, easily defensible, whose luminous halls marked already the passage from the medieval house-fort to the affluent dwelling of Renaissance time"⁵. On the other hand, the necessity of a rigorous geometric expression based on elementary forms, like the square, sometimes created useless in-between spaces when applied to a medieval pre-existence, as in the case of Palazzo Besta. Such a problem is not confined to the area in question, since the difficulty of imposing the renaissance language on a medieval fabric had been described also by Sebastiano Serlio⁶.

1 Giacomo Carlo Bascapé and Carlo Perogalli, *Palazzi Privati di Lombardia* (Milan: Electa, 1965), 13.

2 Cantone dei Grigioni, "Cultura Architettonica. Rocche e Torri."

3 Della Misericordia, Rao and Baruta, "Il Paesaggio Nobiliare: Castelli, Torri e Palazzi fra Medioevo ed Età Moderna."

4 Angelini et al., *Beni Culturali della Comunità Montana Valtellina di Sondrio*, 84.

5 Bascapé and Perogalli, *Palazzi Privati di Lombardia*, 267.

6 Carlo Perogalli and Giampiero Cuppini, *Il Palazzo Italiano* (Milan: Touring Club Italiano, 1975), 10.

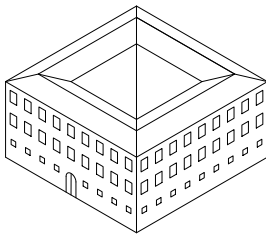


Fig. 30 - Closed Courtyard

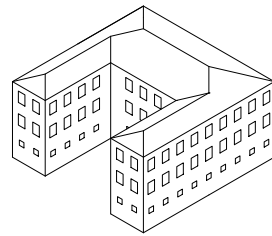


Fig. 31 - Open Courtyard

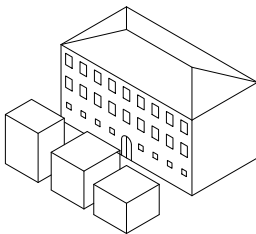


Fig. 32 - Single Body

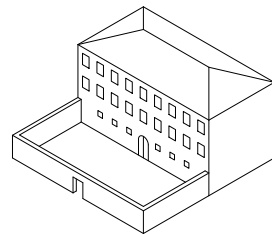


Fig. 33 - Rearward Single Body

Some specific interior spaces, of peasant origin, are taken up and elaborated according to richer and more prestigious models: this is the case of the *stüa*, which from a humble heated space becomes an extremely refined room, in which coats of arms and *boiserie* carved by expert craftsmen convey the richness of their owner. Another example in this sense is the wooden loggia of Palazzo Quadrio De Maria Pontaschelli⁷, that tried to find a compromise between the gallery of the rural house and the porch of renaissance influx. In the mid-15th century bigger portals start to appear, a sort of erudite translation of the previously described trilithon doors of medieval houses, and will later become a constant in the palatial architecture as far as the 18th century. Also the rustic stone framing of the windows upgrades to an elegant green stone or soapstone frame, frequently embellished with engravings. The bigger dimensions of the openings make at this point necessary to introduce metal grills as mean of protection.

Evolution of an Affirmed Type

Between the end of the 16th and the 17th century, the noble residences were further modified, in some cases in a total manner while in others in a punctual one. The will of modernisation often brought to the disappearance of their renaissance characteristics, especially in rich cities like Milan where wealthy classes could afford to demolish and rebuild their palace anew⁸. In the Italian Rhaetia the model quickly passed from being inspired by the Lombard Renaissance or by Alberti's treatises to an evident influx of the Lombard villa, characterised by narrower spaces⁹. Already in the 17th century the palace typology sees a period of stagnation, in which no important examples were built: this is due both to the political instability of Valtellina in particular, but also to the lack of affirmed architects that isolated this part of the Alps from mannerist and baroque architecture. The latter

finally reached the Alps in the 18th century, where Italian Rhaetia is not only visited by important painters and architects, but exports also well-known personalities such as Pietro Ligari. Needless to say that the new baroque wave is once again interpreted rather than simply copied: the presence of more limited spaces is a constant and typical feature of Valtellina compared to the rest of Lombardy, sign of a less formalised, but not necessarily less elegant, lifestyle¹⁰.

Urban Configurations

As every urban typology, also the *palazzo* has through time assumed the most diverse configurations. However, it is possible to reduce them to four main types, that are also attested in the Italian Rhaetia. This synthesis is also valid for the villa type. The first and most common one is the closed courtyard palace (fig. 30), whose origins can be found in the peristyle of the Roman *domus*: it is constituted of four wings that protect an internal courtyard, sometimes accessible to the public. It could be either free-standing as in the case of Palazzo Strozzi or more often included between other buildings, presenting just one or two façades on the public street. The second type presents a U-shape body, with one side of the courtyard open (fig. 31) and is closer to the plan of a villa, like the case of Villa Visconti Venosta in Grosio. The simplest type is made of a single body, whose longer side usually overlooks the street (fig. 32): starting from the 18th century it leaves the street front to benefit of a garden in the front as a buffer zone between the quiet of the inside and the busy outside world (fig. 33).

7 Comunità Montana Valtellina di Sondrio, "Chiuro. Itinerari fra Storia ed Arte."

8 Bascapé and Perogalli, *Palazzi Privati di Lombardia*, 20.

9 Orggi, Gelmini and Del Barba, *Cultura del Costruire e dell'Abitare in Valtellina*, 25.

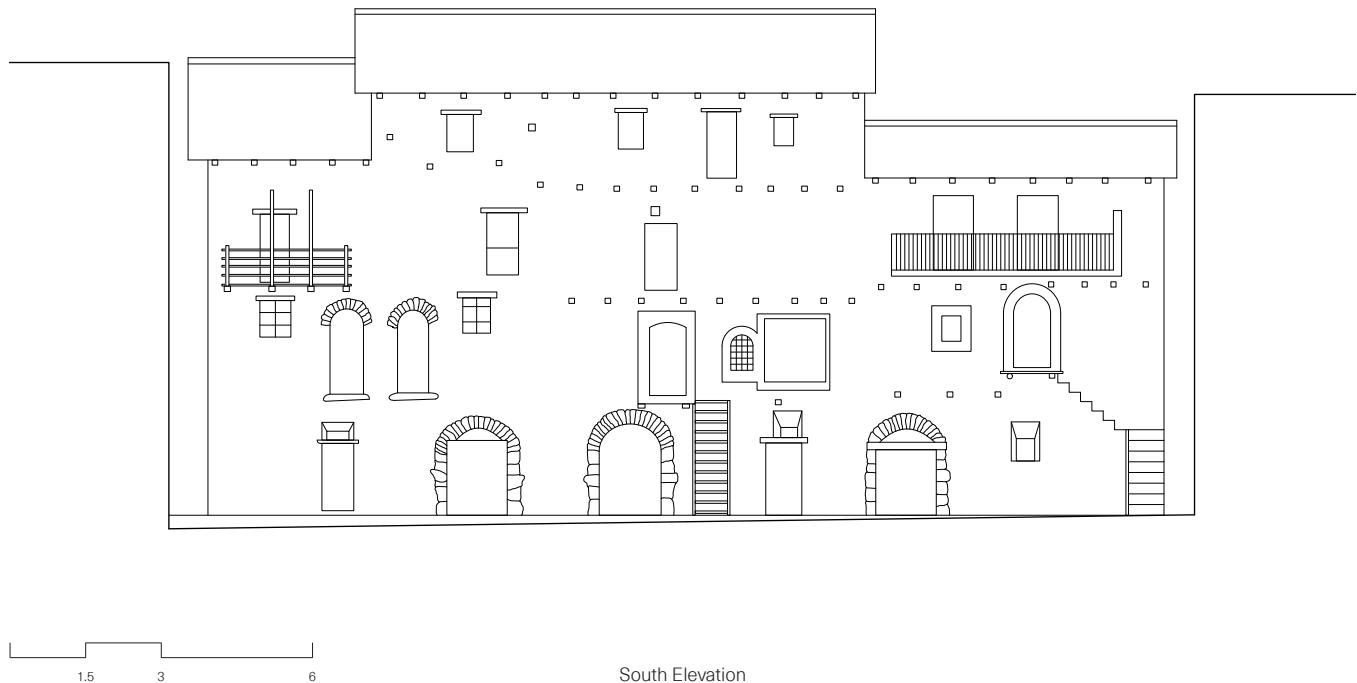
10 Angelini, "I Palazzi," 83.

Palazzo Rurale

Via Gatti 66-70-77, I-23010 Pedemonte

14th Century

301 masl



Historical Notes

Very few medieval mansions of Italian Rhaetia have survived the pass of time. Among them, it has been identified a relatively small building, renamed Palazzo Rurale, very little known both for its position in a small fraction of the village of Berbenno and its current conditions. It does not present any special characteristics but it is an interesting example when considering the transition from the rural house to the palace typology in Valtellina. Moreover, it constitutes the only building left of the original nucleus of the village¹¹. The building consists of three main volumes, which corresponds to three different phases

of construction. The oldest body is the first one when coming from the village and it corresponds to the left part of the current façade. Eventually, the central and the right volumes were built next to it¹². The additions were created by placing the new bodies against the existing walls, thus using the external wall of the previous body as the internal wall of the new building. The position of the complex is typical of the Alps because it runs parallel to the slope and exploits the slope of the terrain, as will later do also Palazzetto Besta and Tenuta La Gatta. At the same time it is peculiar because its perimeter is delimited north and south by two roads, respectively Via Filistei and Via Gatti.

11 Claudio Scamozzi, "Il Palazzo Trecentesco di Via Gatti a Pedemonte," *Bollettino della Società Storica Valtellinese*, no. 42 (1989): 203.

12 Ibid., 205.



Siteplan



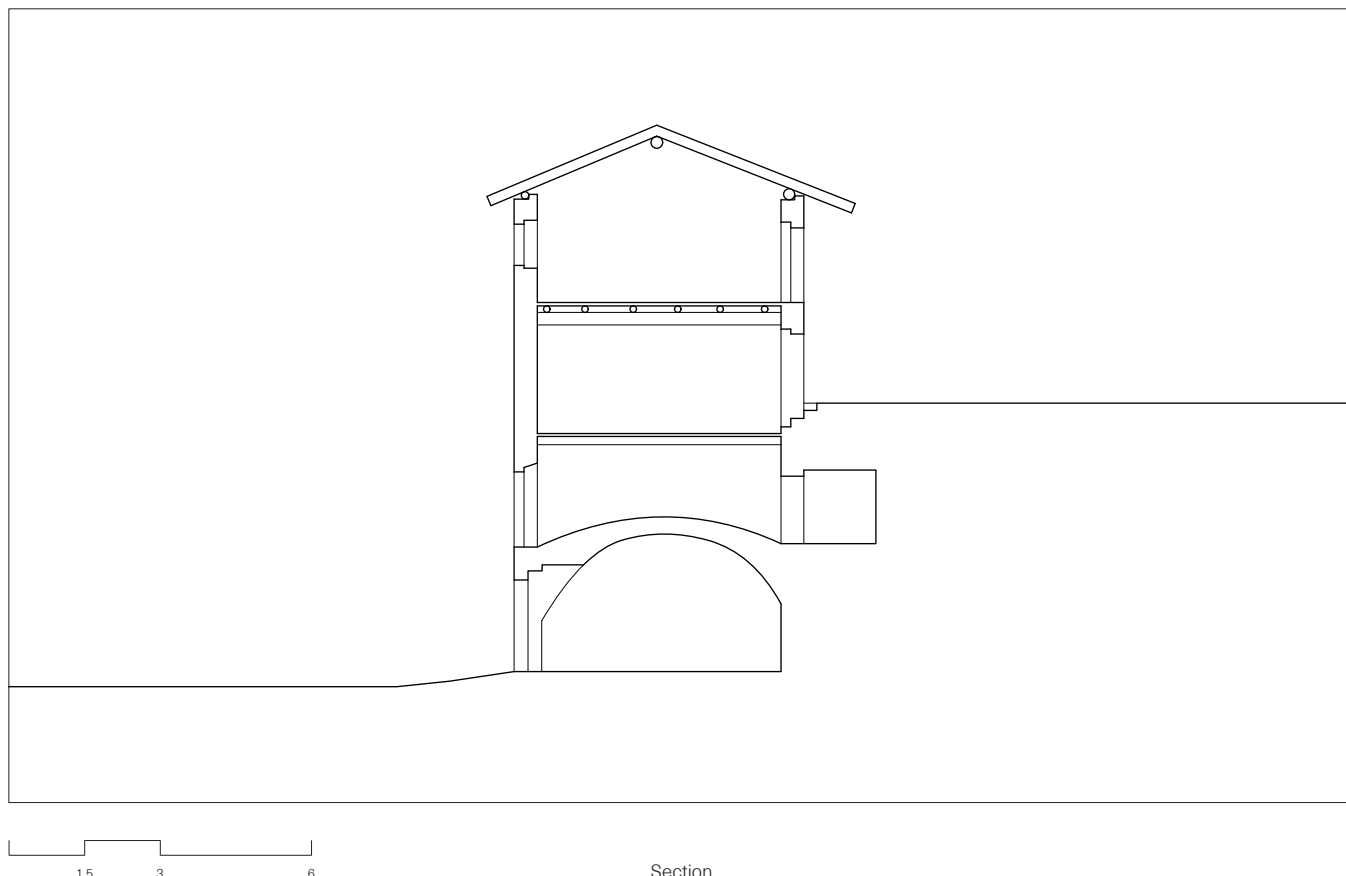
Façade

The façade presented here does not reflect the current situation of the building but has been reconstructed by erasing spurious elements. Even in its purified form, it is the result of centuries-old stratifications, an aspect that all the buildings treated in this research have in common but that only in few cases bear such evident traces of their past. In first place, it comes spontaneous to look at the three volumes as they were three tower-houses put one next to the other, as shown by their different heights. The putlog holes allow to summarily understand the heights of the floors, three on the side volumes, four in the central volume, and would have corresponded to the position of the wooden

galleries. The vaulted portals of the ground floor corresponds to the stables, whilst the entrances on the first floor seem to float in the air but were once reachable to a series of staircase.

Interior Organisation

The clearness of the outside volumes corresponds to the basic layout of the inside. On the ground floor the first body is divided into two rectangular rooms, while the two others have a single space each, of double size compared to the first ones. All of them are accessible from south and were probably used as stable, barn or deposit¹³. Always from south it is possible to access the first floor, thanks to a couple of L-shaped staircases, an



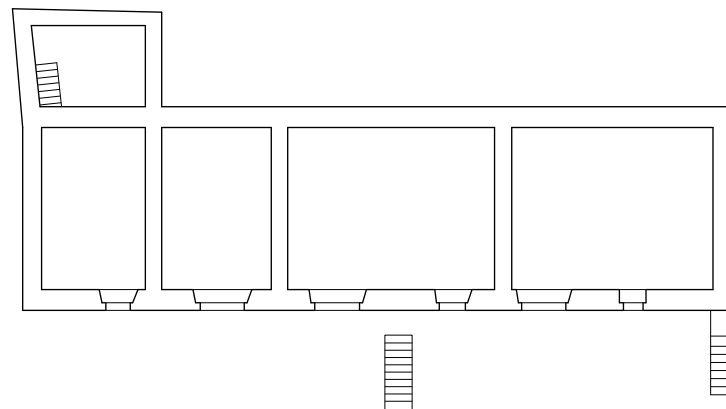
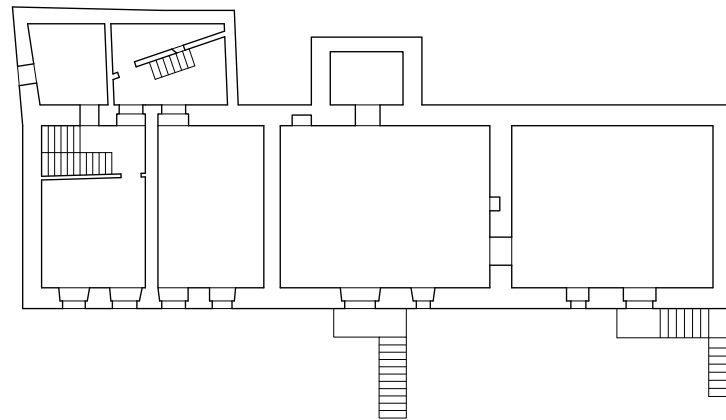
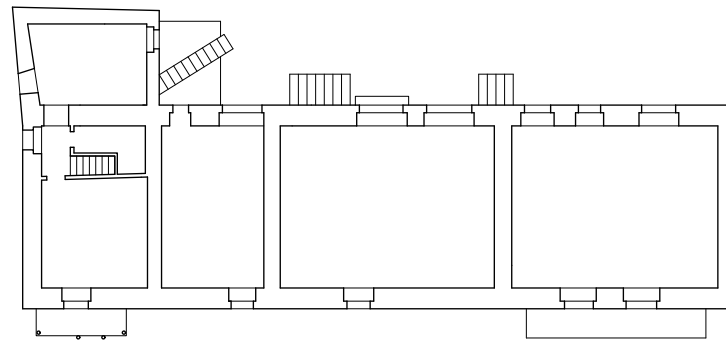
absolutely ordinary solution in medieval local architecture as already seen in Casa Vaninetti. The oldest body can be accessed only through an internal staircase, unusual in rural dwellings, that from the north side leads to an anti-chamber on which two doors open. In fact, the division in two spaces of the ground floor is repeated on the first floor because the division walls is structural, as can be seen from its thickness. Lastly, the second floor can be accessed only from north, just like the third floor of the central building.

As said before, this building represents a first step towards the evolution of the rural house into a more prestigious mansion, always bearing in mind the meaning that this term had in the alpine context. The basic type is still the tower-house and no major innovation has so far been introduced. The circulation is in fact almost exclusively external but we already start to see some staircases within the oldest volume, as well as a first attempt to connect the rooms. Nonetheless, two important elements are still missing: the first one is the horizontal circulation within the different spaces, that are still just a juxtaposition of volumes without any interior passage. The next step in the evolution of the palatial typology will be in fact the appearance of the enfilade system. The second element is the absence of any heating devices, so to say fireplaces and chimneys, that one would con-

sider crucial in the high-ranking habitation and that were not present in the smoke-chamber heated buildings.

Construction

Talking about construction there are no main differences with lower-classes architecture buildings. Structural walls are in stone, around 50 centimetres thick, which means almost half of the previously analysed Casa Vaninetti. Despite this, the openings are still scarce. The slabs are out of wooden beams that fit within holes in the stonework. The roof is made of wooden round beams, simply decorticated trunks, positioned parallel to the longer side according to the horse roof model. The lateral ones lean entirely on the ending walls, while the central one has only two support points on the shorter walls.



Ground, First and Second Floor

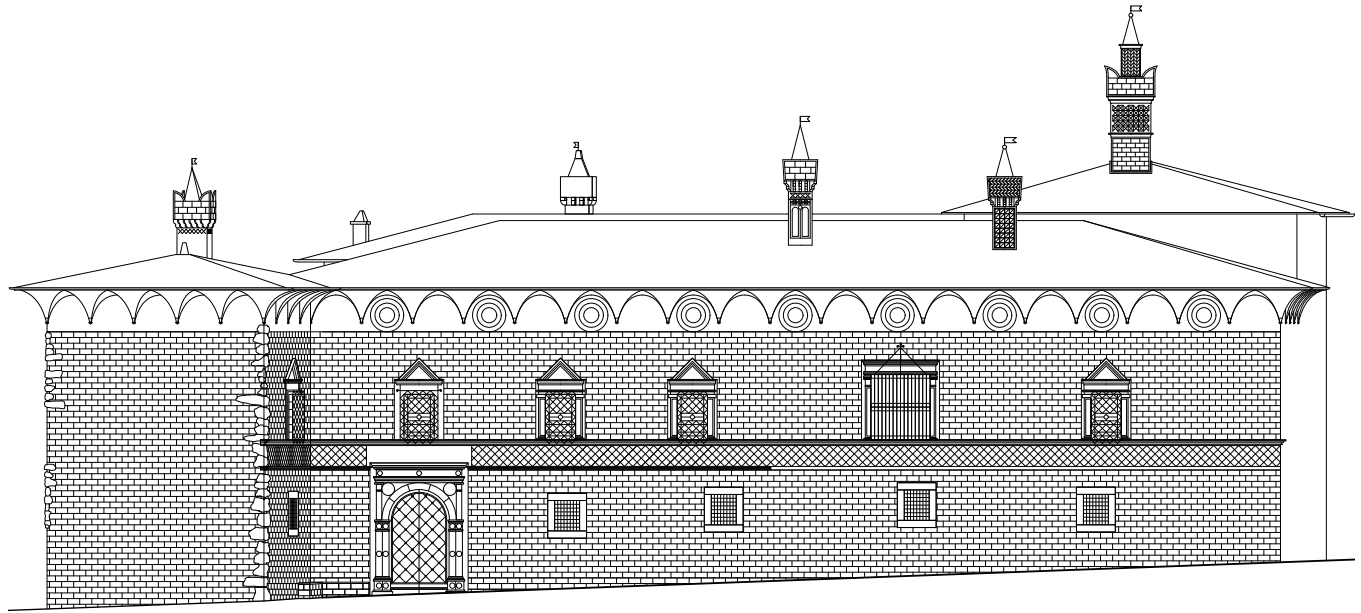


Palazzo Besta

Via Fabio Besta 8, I-23036 Teglio

1519

818 masl



East Elevation

Historical Notes

The history of Palazzo Besta began in medieval times, more precisely in the 14th century. At that time Teglio was the most important centre of the valley and, according to some theories, the place that gave origin to the very name Valtellina (Valley of Teglio). It is the crenellated masonry of the north façade that allows to hypothesise this date: initially fortified and turreted, the building was then transformed into a palace. Signs of transformation can be seen in the anomalous connection between the tower of the south façade, supported by arches, and the main body of the palace. The connection consists of a large worked stone that supports a lowered masonry arch and is protected by

metal bars that define its parallelepiped volume. The theory of the original defensive function is confirmed by the similarity of the “square window with grille that recalls those of the towers of S. Maria a Müstair in the Lower Engadine”¹⁴. It may be also hypothesised an agricultural function of the complex, seen the fields around it. The presence of a wall that delimits the garden could suggest a castle-fence function, as is the case of the Castello di Mancapane, where cattle and people could take temporary shelter in order to escape the frequent raids operated by soldiers and brigands. This is a frequent expedient in Valtellina, whose inhabitants were used to foreign incursions. The architecture of Palazzo Besta was enriched and completed with ele-

14 Galletti and Mulazzani, *Il Palazzo Besta di Teglio: una Dimora Rinascimentale in Valtellina*, 48.



ments that are not anymore present, such as wooden corbels. Putlog holes, visible above all on the central part of the south elevation, permitted the insertion and assembly of scaffolding both during construction and renovation works.

Façade and Surroundings

The transformation of the original layout of the palace was carried out by the Besta family, whose name it still retains today, probably starting from the end of the 15th century. The dating to this period also derives from an evident influence that the new façade of the Banco Mediceo in Milan, perhaps realised

by Michelozzo or Filarete, had on Palazzo Besta, as well as on other palaces of Lombardy¹⁵. On the east elevation it is clearly visible that the two-storey development of the façade expresses an elongated renaissance style, divided in two by a continuous entablature whose lower part indicates the height of the floor while the upper part acts as a sill. Palazzo Besta represents the first example of a new sensibility in the Italian Rhaetia, that from central Italy reached the rigid climate of the Alps approximately one century after. Nevertheless, medieval-like crenellated residences continued to be built throughout all the 16th century, as can be observed in the Pedenale district in Mazzo¹⁶. The exist-

15 Ibid., 48.

16 Angelini et al., *Beni Culturali della Comunità Montana Valtellina di Sondrio*, 79.



Section

ent tower of Palazzo Besta, forcibly incorporated in the renovation project, does not allow the symmetry to be maintained but presents a well controlled scheme of proportions: the height of its two floors, excluding the entablature and the lunettes, is equivalent (1:1 ratio). The problematic position of the portal is understandable when considering the particular location of the building and its relationship with the context: the street in front of it, nowadays Via Fabio Besta, was also at that time delimited on the opposite side by the boundary wall enclosing some other properties of the Besta family. Consequently, only a side view of the façade was possible, and the choice of positioning the entrance door at the point where the street makes a sharp curve allows a clear perception of the portal to the visitor coming from the centre of Teglio. Such an eccentric position can be found in other Lombard examples such as Palazzo Fontana Silvestri in Milan and Palazzo Mozzanica in Lodi: Perogalli affirms that this design choice derives from the will of adapting to the urban fabric rather than imposing a new hierarchy¹⁷. In the slightly obtuse

corner where the east branch touches the tower there is a street bench, a *panca di via*, also made of stone like the façade. In spite of its limited size, this element recalls important examples like the one of Palazzo Rucellai and Palazzo Strozzi, confirming the knowledge of the Tuscan fashion by the unknown designer¹⁸. Coming back to the alpine environment, the portal of Palazzo Besta has lots of elements in common with the one of Palazzo Geremia in Trento; the two palaces share also the lunette decorations under the roof. This motif is quite frequent in the late 15th and 16th century: other relevant examples can be found in the contemporary Palazzetto Besta and Palazzo Guicciardi Garlaschelli¹⁹. Unlike the latter, Palazzo Besta present another typical renaissance element, the sgraffito cladding of the lower part of the façade. In Valtellina the sgraffito technique is used mainly to represent repetitive geometric figures like triangles or squares, creating an as effective as simple play of dichromy, but it is in Engadin and Val Bregaglia that it becomes a fully developed artistic tool. In the case of Palazzo Besta the sgraffito is

17 Bascapé and Perogalli, *Palazzi Privati di Lombardia*, 45.

18 Ibid., 266.

19 Beti et al., *Palazzi Signorili nella Rezia Italiana. Volume 2*, 174.

limited only to the east façade and to the former tower, which are the only elements on the public street. A very similar sgraffito, with the same grey-white colour scheme, can be found in Palazzo Medici Riccardi: what is relegated, in the Tuscan example, to the minor function of decorating the walls of the internal courtyard becomes worthy of the expressiveness of the façade of Palazzo Besta.

Courtyard

The masterpiece of symmetry and renaissance architecture is undoubtedly the courtyard. Leon Battista Alberti himself defined this element of the palace as “the heart of the house (...) around which the smaller parts will gravitate”²⁰. Particular attention has been given to geometric proportions: the outer perimeter is in fact a perfect square, as it is the inner perimeter. The dimensions are based on the size of the *braccio tellino*, about 50 centimetres long. Sixteen columns mark the rhythm of four arches per façade on the ground floor, while the columns on the first floor are double in number. A similar architectural choice, of typical Lombard taste²¹, can be found in the loggia of Castel Masegra in Sondrio, even though its proportions still retain a medieval heaviness. The angular problem is solved by the fusion of two semi-columns that allow the continuity of the entablature and the regular keeping of the arch span, reinforcing the most statically weak point. Each façade is articulated on three floors and has the already seen proportions of 1:1 (length and width are equal): extremely refined is the fact that each element is in proportion with the others. Originally the sgraffito rustication was covering also the walls of the courtyard, where eventually a fresco depicting Virgil's Aeneid was realised. The typology of the internal courtyard is well suited to the Valtellina context as it was common practice to articulate several units around a closed courtyard with driveway access, especially in the villages²². Within the courtyard a well was usually placed, as it is the case of the puteal of Palazzo Besta.

Interior Organisation

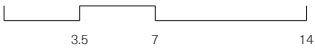
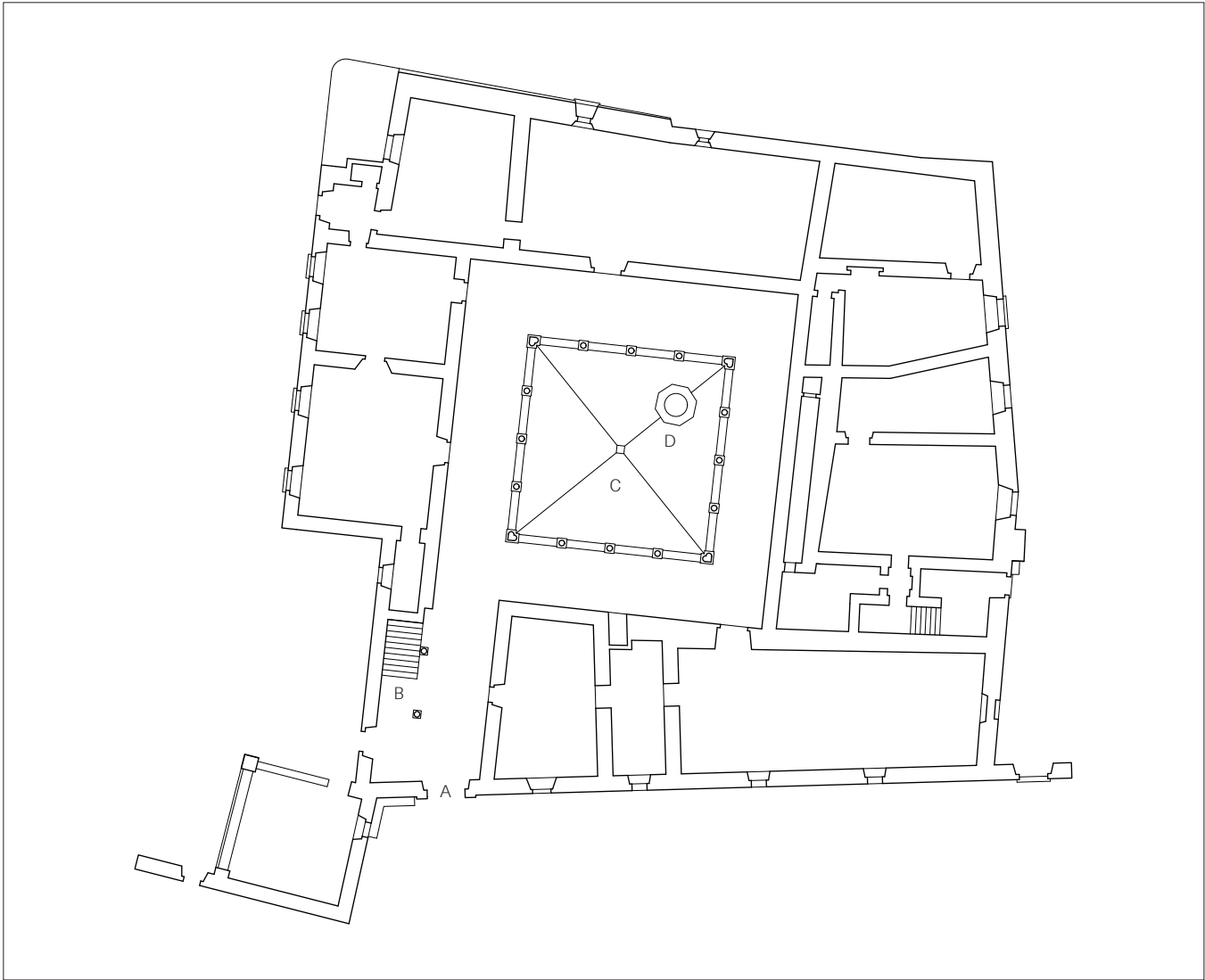
Reaching the first floor coming from the main staircase, the visitor is immersed in the circulation space that runs on the three open sides of the loggia. The only closed side, free of columns, is decorated by a large frescoed surface. The perception of the courtyard, as it happens on the ground floor, occurs in a

perspective way from the south-east corner column. The door immediately on the right gives access to the Hall of Honour, which takes light from three openings on the main façade and is therefore the most important room of the building. The lunette motif of the external façade is repeated in the lowered nailed vault: the oculi are in this case replaced by painted medallions, under which a cycle of frescoes develops. This type of vault, widespread in the renaissance panorama, has an illustrious example in the Piccolomini Library in Siena. Through an uncovered gallery it is possible to access what was a former tower of the original medieval building, where a squared room covered by a vaulted ceiling with 16 sails hosts an archive. Continuing towards north an enfilade links the main hall with a 16th-century *stüa* and the Creation Hall, maybe deliberately lowered in order to allow the visitor to better observe the frescoes representing biblical scenes. It should be noted that this architectural choice and the presence of two windows only make this room rather dark. The dining room behind the frescoed façade of the courtyard, on the other hand, is much brighter, and is covered by two shell vaults with floral motifs bordering the lunettes.

20 Bascapé and Perogalli, *Palazzi Privati di Lombardia*, 266.

21 Leon Battista Alberti, *De Re Aedificatoria* (Florence: Nicolò Di Lorenzo, 1485), 135.

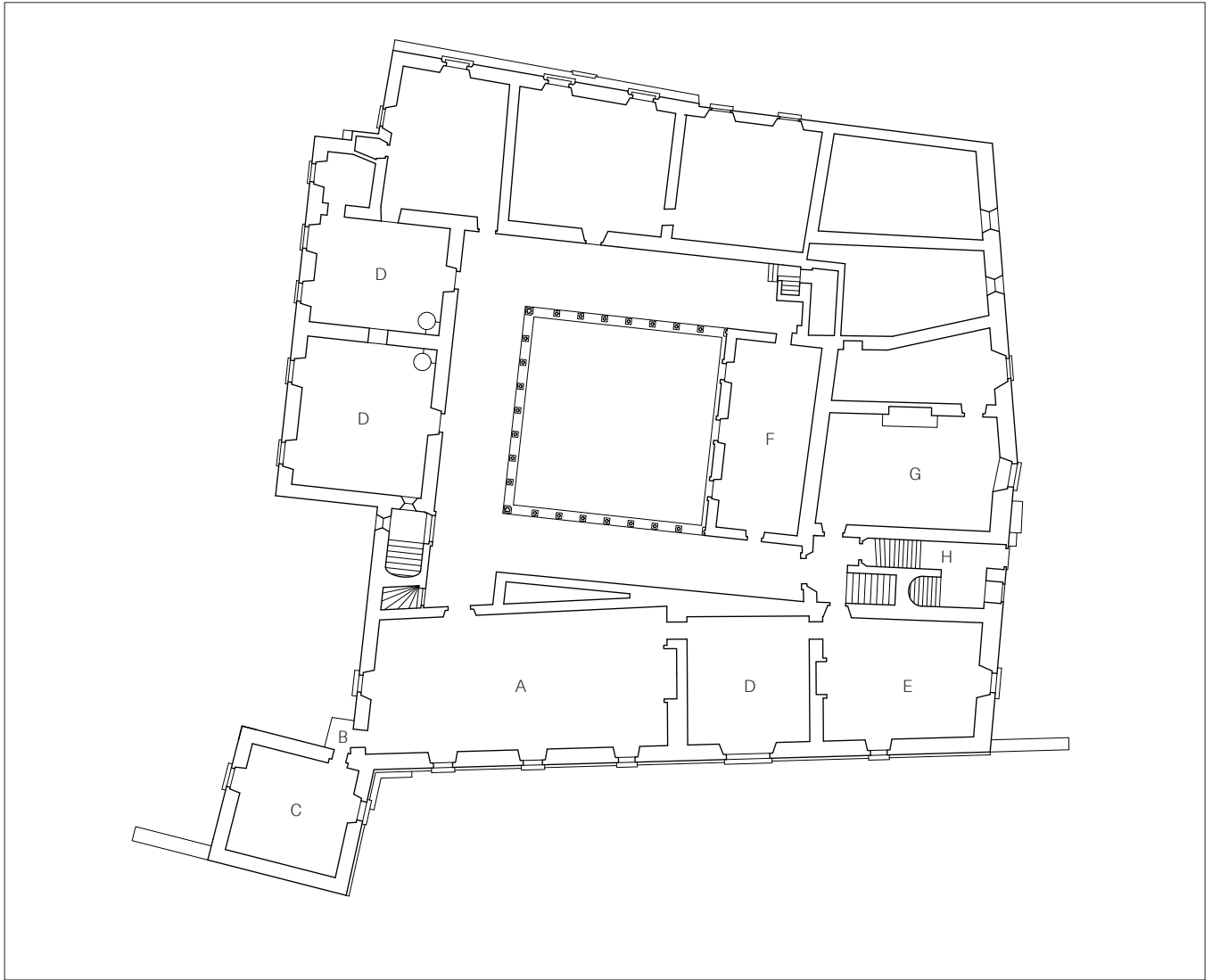
22 Benetti, *Dimore Rurali Medievali del Versante Orobico Valtellinese*, 69.



Ground Floor



- A - Portal
- B - Main Staircase
- C - Courtyard
- D - Puteal



3.5 7 14

First Floor



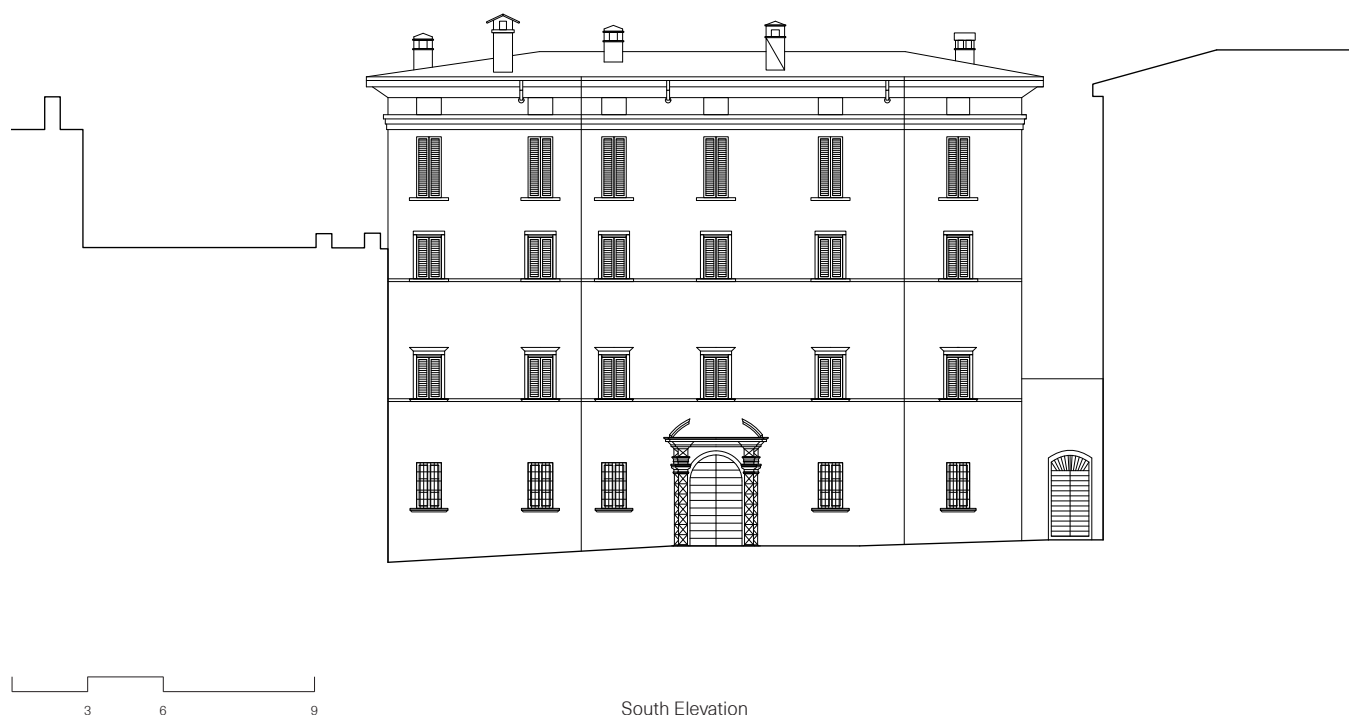
- A - Hall of Honour
- B - Gallery
- C - Studiolo/Archive
- D - *Stüa*
- E - Hall of Creation
- F - Dining Hall
- G - Kitchen
- H - Secondary Staircase

Palazzo Sassi De' Lavizzari

Via Maurizio Quadrio 27, I-23100 Sondrio

17th Century

300 masl



Historical Notes

The first nucleus of the building probably dates back to the 15th century²³ and underwent many modifications in the following century, during the period in which the noble families of Sondrio started to renovate their mansions. This process affected particularly the area around the Piazza Quadrio, within the walls of the city and the Punta di Prada gate. The palace was later bought by a branch of the Salis family, together with some neighbouring buildings from other prominent families, who edified a single bigger complex, in the same way it did in Tirano with Palazzo Salis. It later became property of the Lambertenghi

and ultimately of Lavizzari family²⁴, until it was donated to the municipality in 1922. The palace has undergone many changes and hosts today the seat of the Valtellina Museum of Art.

Façade and Surroundings

The most important façade is the one overlooking the public garden. The building develops on four floors and an attic: the two upper storeys were added in the first half of the 19th century, whereas the rest of the façade was the result of the refurbishment operated by Johann Salis Zizers between 1670 and 1680. Some traces of what was probably the medieval tower of the

²³ Abbiati et al., *Residenze Nobiliari di Valtellina e Valchiavenna. Le Dimore delle Famiglie Salis e Sertoli*, 122.

²⁴ Bascapé and Perogalli, *Palazzi Privati di Lombardia*, 270.



Siteplan

Lavizzari is still present near the top left corner, where some ashlars have survived the test of time. Another tower has been discovered during the refurbishment and can be recognised when looking at the southern front of the building, articulated according to three different directions that probably correspond to three distinct pre-existences.

Stylistically the façade is extremely sober, as typical of other Lombard examples, and the rhythm is given by the windows, that on the first and second floor are connected by a thin cornice. The ground and first floors show a remarkable height of almost 5 metres, while the second storey is lower because of the addition in 1840 of a third floor²⁵, that has altered the propor-

tions of the façade. The round portal of the southern elevation, dating to the 18th century, has diamond-shaped ashlars and an interrupted stone tympanum that affirm the predominant role of this façade, south-exposed, over the other one, marked by a simpler portal. Nevertheless, the major road of the city of Sondrio was passing through Via Parravicini, meaning that the main public façade was the northern.

Courtyard

Both the portals lead to the central courtyard: the north one gives access to wide stone steps while the south one opens on a cross-vaulted entrance hallway. The visitor finds himself im-

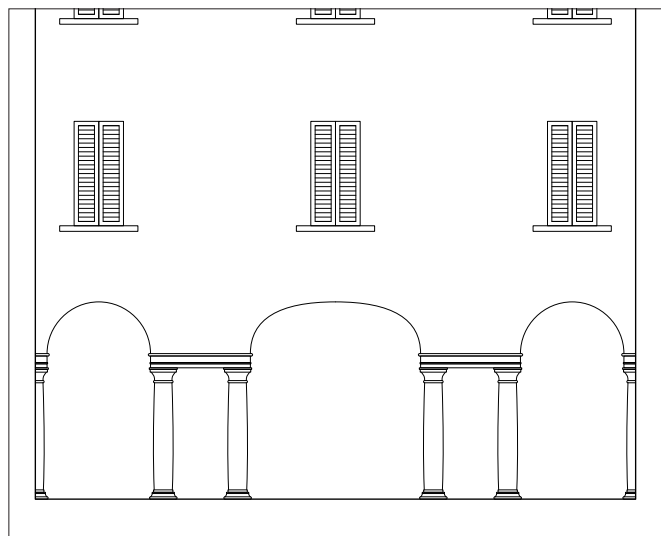


Fig. 34 - Elevation of the Inner Courtyard

- A - Public Entrance
- B - Private Entrance
- C - Courtyard
- D - Main Staircase
- E - Secondary Staircase
- F - Heated Room
- G - *Stüa*

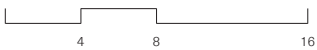
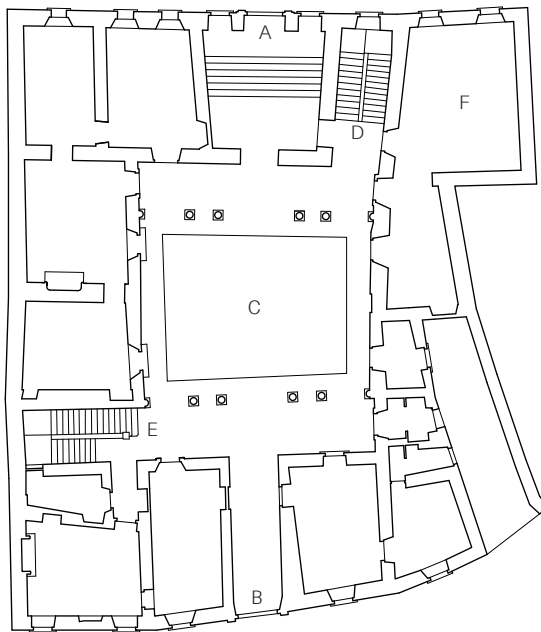
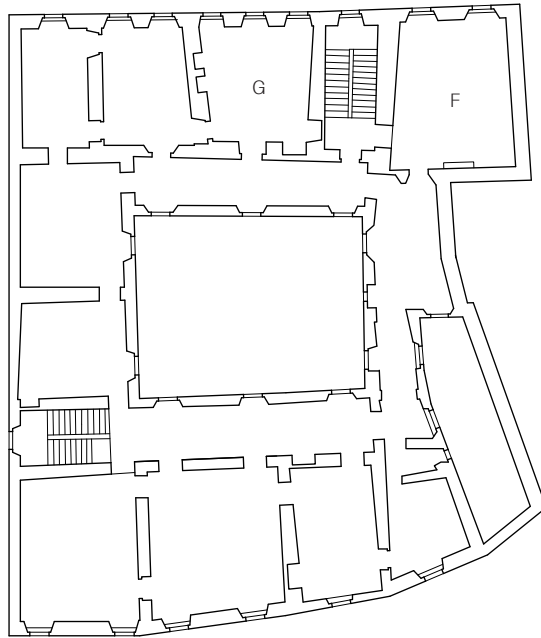
mediately at the centre of the courtyard: there is no intention of providing the perspective glimpse that we find in Palazzo Besta, the courtyard has lost its geometric and artistic importance to become more of an utilitarian element of the house organisation. In this sense, its shape does not respect specific proportions but simply adapts to the lot. The centrality of the courtyard can be seen in a different way if considering that on the south side there was a garden, designed by Pietro Ligari²⁶. The public entrance on Via Lavizzari could provide a direct view on the garden, just like it still is possible to experience in Palazzo Salis in Tirano. Similarly to the latter, the garden was encircled by a wall protecting it from the outside and eventually demolished. The simplicity of the courtyard gains in elegance thanks to the two parallel porches in green stone of Tresivio that imitate a loggia of Serlian windows (fig. 34). This renaissance element, based on Tuscan columns supporting round arches as seen in the Basilica of Vicenza or in Palazzo Vincentini in Rieti, is in Palazzo Sassi De' Lavizzari recklessly modified to adapt to the width of the courtyard, originating a clumsy central lowered arch. The other two sides of the courtyard are walled and no loggias are present. The only element of variation is a small gallery covered with a wooden roof. Five portals at ground floor give access to some heated spaces, while the upper floors can be reached by to two stone staircases. Of similar dimensions, the north stairs receive light from the façade, while the south ones are located left of the porch according to a very common scheme and are consequently privy of light.

Interior Organisation

The trapezoidal plot of the palace is located between two important streets, Via Quadrio and Via Parravicini, both leading to Piazza Quadrio. Consequently, the plan structure is articulated on two fronts, respectively facing north and south, that are evidently influenced by the directory of the streets. On the ground floor the rectangular shaped rooms are organised around the courtyard, that works also as a main circulation space. An enfilade system also allows to pass from one space to the other, but it is sometimes interrupted by irregularities of the plan and by the southern staircase. On the first floor the situation is slightly different. The enfilade system continues to be present but it is flanked by a corridor that runs along three sides of the courtyard. Whether this was a feature of the 17th century palace it is not known, but the C-shaped corridor recalls certainly the loggia of Palazzo Besta, interrupted on the northern side. Unlike the latter, Palazzo Sassi De' Lavizzari does not fully exploit the courtyard: nowadays only a series of windows open on the inside, even though there are still traces of what was an older loggia²⁷.

26 Abbiati et al., *Residenze Nobiliari di Valtellina e Valchiavenna. Le Dimore delle Famiglie Salis e Sertoli*, 126-127.

27 Negri et al., *Palazzi Signorili nella Rezia Italiana*, 216.



Ground and First Floor

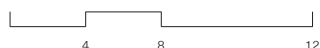
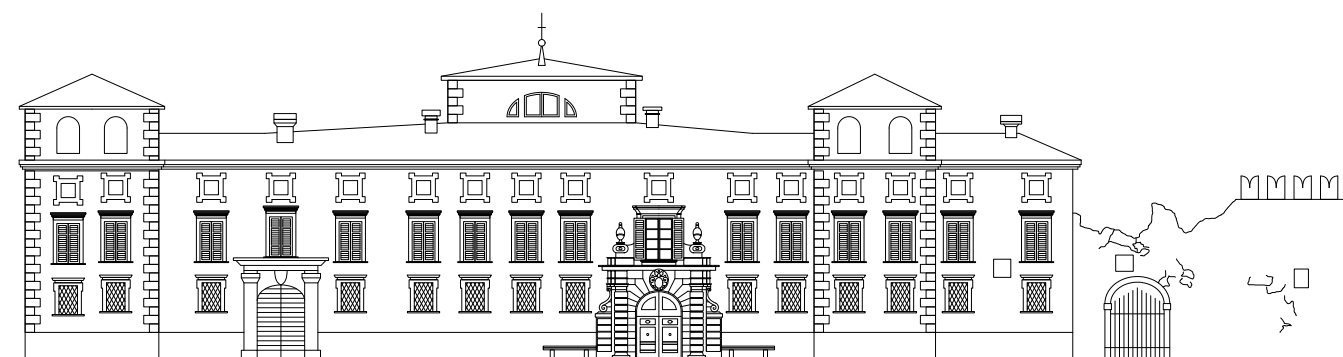


Palazzo Salis

Via Salis 3, I-23037 Tirano

1703

445 masl



South-West Elevation

Historical Notes

The history of the palace begins with the purchase by the Salis family of several properties, which previously belonged to important families of Tirano, in that area called *Capo di Terra* that was located on the eastern border of the city²⁸. In fact Rudolf Andreas Salis, after having received a fief in Valtellina from the bishop of Como thanks to his catholic faith, moved to Tirano in 1646 with his son, Johann. It is in particular by will of the latter that the palace was commissioned: notwithstanding, after being nominated governor of the city on behalf of the Grisons and having received the title of count from the emperor Leopold I

in 1694, he died without seeing it finished. He was the same Johann Salis responsible for the refurbishment of Palazzo Salis (now Sassi De' Lavizzari) in Sondrio and for the construction of the Upper Castle of Zizers²⁹, near Chur, hence this branch of the family is known as Salis-Zizers.

The palace is still nowadays property of the heirs of the Salis family, thanks to their ancestor Rodolfo who managed in 1781 to keep its possession despite the confiscation decreed by Napoleon at the end of the Grison domination. With an area of 6000 square metres, Palazzo Salis and its gardens are one of the largest housing complex in Valtellina.

²⁸ Abbiati et al., *Residenze Nobiliari di Valtellina e Valchiavenna. Le Dimore delle Famiglie Salis e Sertoli*, 62.

²⁹ Ibid., 56.



Façade and Surroundings

As already said, the new palace was born on the body of existing buildings, brought together by a baroque architectural layer that manages to create a new and unified entity. This is best expressed in the façade on Piazzetta Salis, where two protruding bodies at the sides seem reminiscent of the towers of a castle, like Palazzo Balbiani owned by the Salis themselves in Chiavenna, but reworked under classical forms, similar to those of Palazzo Gallio in Gravedona³⁰. The fake ashlar of the towers recall the fortified medieval architecture of Valtellina: it has been said that the local architecture, despite the Grison domination, remained

essentially Italian in its spirit³¹. This is true but in reality the complex of the palace extends far beyond the parcel delimited by the façade: slightly inclined towards the crossroad with Via Caimi, a crenelated medieval wall was the first element perceived by visitors coming from the Porta Bormina (Bormio's Gate) through Via Visconti Venosta. Furthermore, two portals give access to the palace: the secondary doorway is located left of the piazza and is framed by a sober stone decoration with a Doric order, that introduces to the Stables Courtyard. The main entrance is located at the centre of the new façade, in front of the long and narrow piazza, but results asymmetric if seen within the larger drawing

30 Coppa et al., *Civiltà Artistica in Valtellina e Valchiavenna. Il Secondo Cinquecento e il Seicento*, 70.

31 Renzo Sertoli Salis, *Il Palazzo Salis di Tirano* (Sondrio: Ramponi, 1971), 8.

of the 17th century elevation. This is a recognisable sign of the compromise imposed to the architect by the presence of the pre-existence. The frame of the main portal is in green Grosotto stone, commonly used for windows frames in the area of Upper Valtellina, and its design comes from a 16th century drawing of Jacopo Barozzi³², known as Il Vignola, slightly modified in the upper part where a window is embedded.

Interior Organisation

Looking at the plan, it is relatively easy to distinguish the existing buildings whose union gave birth to the actual palace. In particular it must be noticed the presence of few courtyards, around which the previous noble residences were probably developing. Paying attention to the inner walls, whose layout may have been modified, and to the position of the staircases, unlikely to have changed, it is possible to recognise two main buildings corresponding to the two portals on Piazzetta Salis. If this theory is correct, it would make sense the position of the main staircase and of the Hall of Honour, located between the two.

The main portal leads to a porched Lombard corridor with lowered cross vaults. This corridor leads to the main courtyard, known as the Sundial Courtyard and overlooked by the family's private flats. As soon as stepping into the complex the visitor is offered a glimpse of the Italian garden, located right beyond a metal gate. On the opposite side of the courtyard it is possible to mount the grand staircase which, large and made of green stone, leads to the main floor of the palace. A wooden gate on the ground floor marks the entrance to the cellars, nowadays used by the wine firm of the family. The brightness of the staircase is guaranteed by thermal windows, opened in the central lunettes of an octagonal umbrella vault built on a quadrangular base. Through the left-hand door it is reachable the largest space of the house, the *Salone d'Onore* (Hall of Honour), in which a painted architecture expands the space over its physical boundaries. Its actual appearance dates to the reconstruction of 1762, when the previous ceiling was destroyed by a fire³³ and the count Carlo Salis conceived the idea of a wide frescoed hall. The three rows of windows on the north side, the only openings in the room, are echoed by three painted windows which, together

with the frescoed marble portals and a fake opening with a spiral staircase, form the decoration of the walls of the hall. The desire for illusion and expansion of space is much more evident and pushed in the ceiling, where a baroque fresco gives birth to an exaggerated perspective. The rectangular corners of the salon are smoothed out by a pictorial decoration that is intended to give the illusion of being in an elliptical space. The choice of delicate pastel colours, in Venetian style and already seen in other Valtellina frescoes and in the residence of the Salis Tagstein family in Chiavenna, avoids the risk that the composition may be too heavy. The light spreads effectively inside the space, illuminating a hall that otherwise would have been quite dark due to its position. Another important space is the so-called *Saloncello* (Small Salon), a representative frescoed room heated by a fireplace. The solution chosen for the vault is interesting: curved wooden beams form the light frame that supports the ceiling³⁴. Also in this case the frescoes try to convey a sensation of infiniteness through the painted perspective.

Continuing on with the visit, it can be seen that the palace still largely conserves an enfilade distribution system, typical of 18th century mansions. Make an exception some rooms overlooking the north side of the Stables Courtyard, which are also provided of an external circulation that acts at the same time as a balcony. As far as the flats used today by the family are concerned, inside each space have been obtained two rooms, leaving a portion overlooking the Sundial Courtyard as a corridor. A raised passage over Via San Carlo, of the type seen also in Palazzo Sertoli, allows to reach the homonym church, whose structure was already present in the 17th century³⁵. Probably the church and the sacristy were part of a mansion leaning on the 15th-century walls of the city, seen the elegant decorations of the latter³⁶.

Courtyards and Service Spaces

The massive volume of the palace receives light mainly from its courtyards and from the garden, given the limited dimensions of Piazzetta Salis and the narrow Via San Carlo. Despite one may think the contrary, the most important courtyard is the one accessed through the secondary portal, the Stables Courtyard. This elongated yard is in fact overlooked by the Hall of Honour and the *Saloncello* and it is the oldest of the whole complex,

32 Paola Sertoli Salis, "Palazzo Salis."

33 Sertoli Salis, *Il Palazzo Salis di Tirano*, 8.

34 Abbiati et al., *Residenze Nobiliari di Valtellina e Valchiavenna. Le Dimore delle Famiglie Salis e Sertoli*, 69.

35 Ibid., 62.

36 Ibid., 110.



6.5 13 26

Ground Floor



A - Entrance	P - Service Courtyard
B - Keeper's Room	Q - Small Press Courtyard
C - Porch	R - Chickens Courtyard
D - Warehouse	S - Gallery
E - Church	T - Hall of Honour
F - Sacristy	U - <i>Saloncello</i>
G - Stable	V - Imperial Hall
H - Kitchen	W - Bridal Chamber
I - Dining Hall	X - Turks Room
J - Pantry	Y - Bedroom
K - <i>Stüa</i>	Z - Dovecote
L - Library	
M - Greenhouse	
N - Sundial Courtyard	
O - Stables Courtyard	

being dated back to 1569³⁷. On the north side it presents a cross vaulted space that sustains the aforementioned gallery of the first floor, composed of arches on stone Tuscan columns, a 16th century motif well testified in Valtellina. In fact such a structure is very likely to be part of one of the original buildings later implemented in the complex³⁸, perhaps the residence of the Visconti Venosta family. The Sundial Courtyard has an irregular quadrangular shape that recalls the prestigious precedent of Palazzo Besta, whose relative position of the access is identical. Unlike Palazzo Besta though, the considered courtyard is nothing more than a device to provide light and air within the huge housing block, while its function of amusement and leisure is delegated to the garden in the backyard. In a similar way, the other courtyards reflect with their name their initial function, linked with agriculture and rural activities.

Garden

The element that makes Palazzo Salis stand out among the other mansions of Italian Rhaetia is undoubtedly the Italian garden, a unique example in its genre. Accessible from the Sundial Courtyard through a gate and a series of steps, it is a surprise for the external visitor, who could not imagine to find a quiet and remarkable Italian garden within an alpine and urban context as such. It was conceived by Johann Salis himself, on what was before a kitchen garden³⁹. Its relevant size may have been relat-

ed with the knowledge that the count had of Palazzo Vertemate Franchi or of the Salis Soglio palaces in Val Bregaglia⁴⁰. The geometries of the parterre are well controlled but their central axis does not correspond with the access to the garden and the main portal, another sign that the project followed the existing fabric rather than imposing a new one. Even if the access is offset, the gaze of the beholder is immediately brought to the centre of the garden, that ends with two inclined wall meeting in a niche; beyond that, the rural buildings belonging to the same Salis family remain out of sight. East of the complex, after the dovecote, found place the orchard of the palace, together with some subsidiary spaces.

37 Bascapé and Perogalli, *Palazzi Privati di Lombardia*, 268.

38 Abbiati et al., *Residenze Nobiliari di Valtellina e Valchiavenna. Le Dimore delle Famiglie Salis e Sertoli*, 63.

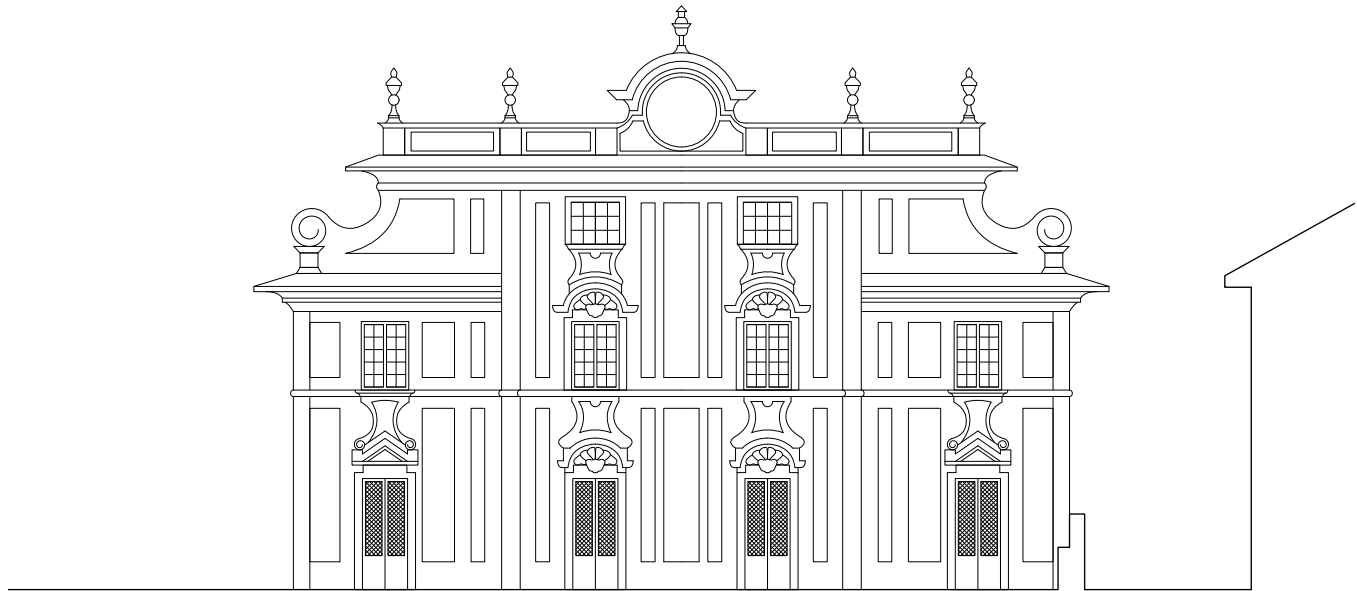
39 Ibid., 110.

40 Ibid., 114.



Palazzo Salis Tagstein

Via Francesco Dolzino 126, I-23022 Chiavenna
Pietro Solari, 1758
330 masl



North Elevation

Historical Notes

In the mid-18th century, the most powerful lineage of the Italian Rhaetia, the Salis, started to provide himself of prestigious residences in the city of Chiavenna⁴¹. Palazzo Salis Tagstein, in its present form, is the result of the will of Antonio Salis: between 1754 and 1758 he enlarged and restored an existing building owned by his family. In fact, it is the only palace in Chiavenna built entirely by the Salis themselves, since all their other properties in the city were previously the residences of other members of the aristocracy, included the famous Palazzo Salis-Pestalozzi. The architect of Palazzo Salis Tagstein may have

been Pietro Solari, whose presence in Chiavenna at that time is confirmed by many documents. Some elements of this palace find in fact a term of comparison with other works by Solari, like Palazzo Malacrida and Palazzo Sertoli⁴².

Façade and Surroundings

The intervention of refurbishment brought a change in the hierarchy of the architectural layout. Previously, the main façade was the one overlooking the so-called *Paart de Mèz*, nowadays Via Dolzino, along which all the aristocratic palaces were situated. The west elevation talks a traditional and banal language for

41 Negri et al., *Palazzi Signorili nella Rezia Italiana*, 82.

42 Abbiati et al., *Residenze Nobiliari di Valtellina e Valchiavenna. Le Dimore delle Famiglie Salis e Sertoli*, 187.



Siteplan



the 18th century: the stone arched portals are the sole element of variation in a façade composed by squared windows on the ground floor and rectangular ones on the upper floors, with the windowsills marking the storeys. Beside keeping the entrance on this side, probably for logistic reason, the Solari ignored the side on Via Dolzino and decided to provide a new, more representative front on the shorter side looking at Piazza Castello. It is an unusual choice indeed, that can be nevertheless understood if considering the narrow space of intervention of Via Dolzino (even though he was operating in similar conditions in Palazzo Malacrida) and the importance of the nearby piazza, on which the old residence of the counts of Chiavenna was located. The new façade, built in late baroque style, is protected by a gate that introduces to the side garden. A rectangular body, whose angles are rounded, protrudes from the centre. Such element of

innovation corresponds to the most important part of the building, the *Teatrino*, which is accessed directly from the two symmetrical entrances of the central body. It is certainly a daring solution for the main façade of a building, at least on a functional point of view if not on an aesthetic one. The ballroom of Palazzo Sertoli is also located on the symmetry axis of its façade, but unlike Palazzo Salis Tagstein it is placed on the first floor, right above the entrance hallway. At this point it is important to consider two aspects: the first one is that the new volume had to adapt to the pre-existing nucleus of the house. The second observation is the fact that Solari has conceived the new façade as a merely representative one, a pure show of elegance and power: for this reason it is not directly connected to the street nor it has a portal, unlike Palazzo Sertoli. Consequently, from its external appearance Palazzo Salis Tagstein has indeed two dif-

- A - Entrance
- B - Staircase
- C - *Teatrino* (Ballroom)
- D - *Saloncello* (Parlour)
- E - Cellar

ferent souls: an elegant front and a traditional one, respectful of the general renaissance look of Chiavenna. Such differentiation may have also been a careful choice, since the Salis family was already strongly criticised for the tremendous influence it had on the affairs of the city⁴³. Both in plan and elevation it can be perceived the double nature of villa and urban palace, aspect that made also ambiguous its classification into either of two: nonetheless, its urban nature is predominant both for its location and the characteristics of the pre-existence.

Nowadays, the façade on the main street goes virtually unnoticed within the homogeneous look of the buildings, while as soon as the passer-by reaches the little Piazza John Silvani, in front of Piazza Castello, the eye is captured by the elegant pastel-coloured façade set in a garden of trees and palm trees. Until the 19th century the gate was accessed through few steps, then eliminated to provide access to the chariots. The garden is bordered to the east by the wall of the stable, now reduced to a state of ruin, and has been enlarged following the demolition of pre-existing properties acquired by the Salis. A series of terraces recall the intervention that Solari was carrying on in Morbegno, as well as the example of Palazzo Vertemate Franchi. Result of a series of demolitions is also the square in front of the façade on Via Dolzino⁴⁴, according to a Renaissance practice whereby the noble palace must enjoy a breathing space in front of its premises, see the case of Palazzo Rucellai.

Interior Organisation

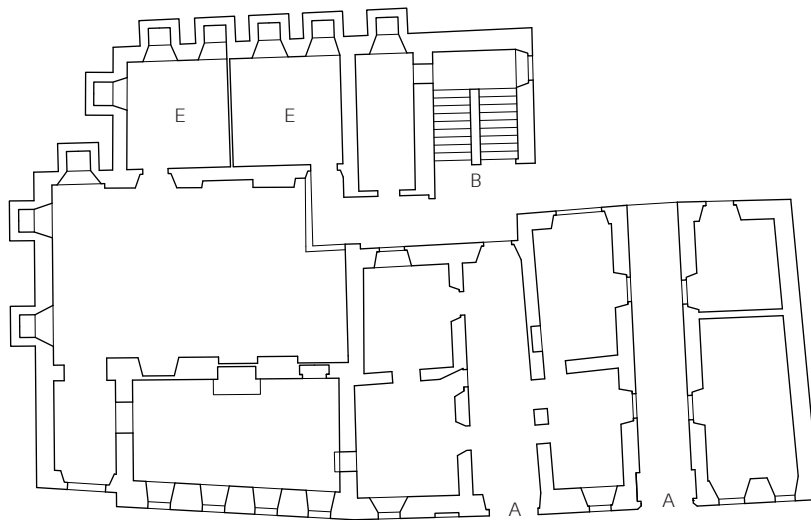
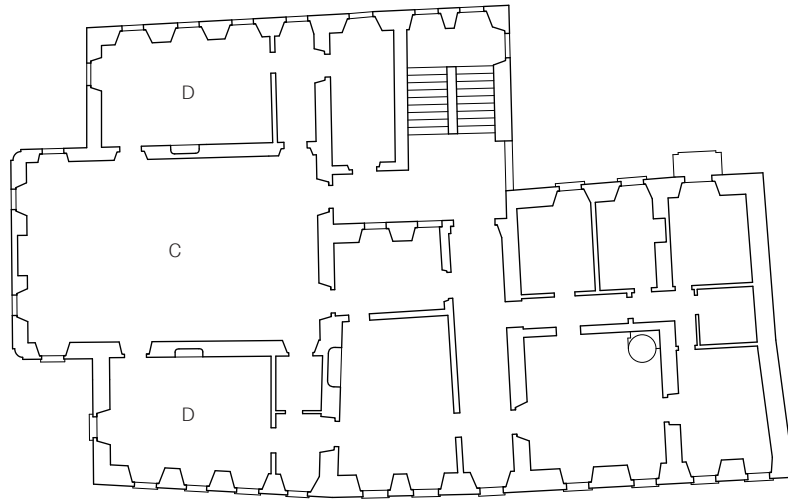
As already mentioned, two gates overlooking the main street give access to two corridors leading respectively to the garden and to the main staircase. The hallways are both flanked by rooms, in a similar way to what happens in Palazzo Vertemate Franchi: this typology is in fact well established in Valchiavenna and Val Bregaglia⁴⁵. The oldest part of the complex may be looked at as a combination of two hallway houses (see chapter *Dwelling*, fig. 26), whose staircase is unified and to whom the 18th-century body connects. The latter is composed of basically three spaces: the aforementioned *Teatrino* and two *Saloncelli* on the side. The *Teatrino* respects the Lombard tradition of the double height⁴⁶ and presents a balcony, accessible from the rooms on the first floor, that overlooks the lower space. It is interesting the contrast between the sobriety of the floor, in soapstone, and the magnificence of the rococo-decorated ceiling, which tries to dilate the space in an extremely forced perspective. Analogies can be found with the analogue vault of the salon of Palazzo Salis in Tirano. Lastly, the symmetrical *Saloncelli* correspond to the two backward sides of the façade, which together with the main staircase form the addition to the original nucleus of the palace.

43 Abbiati et al., *Residenze Nobiliari di Valtellina e Valchiavenna. Le Dimore delle Famiglie Salis e Sertoli*, 180.

44 Scherini and Giovanoli, *Palazzi e Giardini Salis a Soglio e a Chiavenna*, 199.

45 Ibid., 198.

46 Leoni et al., *Palazzo Sertoli in Sondrio*, 30.



Ground and First Floor



Palazzo Sertoli

Piazza Quadrivio 8, I-23100 Sondrio

Pietro Solari, 18th century

302 masl



North Elevation

Historical Notes

The history of Palazzo Sertoli is similar to that of other palaces of the same period: it is in fact the result of a process of unification of pre-existing premises carried out by one of the noble families of Sondrio, the Sertoli. Its vicissitudes can be roughly divided in three phases. At the beginning of the 17th century, Gian Battista Sertoli managed to acquire the entire property of a palace in Piazza Quadrivio⁴⁷, at the further limit of the city walls, and started to embellish it. Unfortunately, his activities of refurbishment were abruptly interrupted first by the insurrections of 1620⁴⁸ and

later by the plague of 1630, that forced the aristocracy to abandoned the city and to take refuge in their suburban villas. Moreover, the houses overlooking the aforementioned square were burnt down and later further destroyed by the group of soldiers passing through Valtellina. In spite of being let down by the circumstances, in 1633 Gian Battista Sertoli took the occasion of buying the neighbouring ruins and started their reconstruction anew⁴⁹. In 1640 the works were brought to completion and the building began its new life. The second phase of the palace starts approximately eighty years later, with the construction

⁴⁷ Battista Leoni et al., *Palazzo Sertoli in Sondrio* (Sondrio: Credito Valtellinese, 1989), 5.

⁴⁸ Negri et al., *Palazzi Signorili nella Rezia Italiana*, 206.

⁴⁹ Leoni et al., *Palazzo Sertoli in Sondrio*, 5.



of a small public church accessible both from Piazza Quadrivio and from the palace. It is eventually by will of Cesare Parravicino that a major work of renovation takes place, under the direction once again of the architect Pietro Solari di Bolvedro. Of his project currently survive the main façade overlooking Piazza Quadrivio, while the inner one has been modified⁵⁰ by the addition of a new body and a greenhouse in the 19th century. The third and last phase of the complex has seen the unification of Palazzo Sertoli with the neighbouring Palazzo Giacconi and Palazzo Paribelli, acquired in 1982 by the local bank Credito Valtellinese, that restored some original elements and adapted it to the ne-

cessity of a modern head-quarter. The building taken into consideration for this research corresponds to the project of Solari, architecturally more interesting and free of the modern modifications that irremediably altered the perception of the palace.

Façade and Surroundings

The drawing of the façade conceived by Solari does not fully correspond to the current state of it. It is not a surprise that the convex façade, dating probably to the 16th century⁵¹, has been kept as much as possible in its sobriety and only few decorations have been added. In fact, his original intentions would

50 Ibid., 8.

51 Ibid., 16.

- A - Entrance
- B - Church
- C - Main Courtyard
- D - Rustic Courtyard
- E - Staircase
- F - Italian Garden

have created a strong contrast with the peasants houses, out of wood and stone, that characterise Via Scarpatetti, the street starting right in front of the palace. The pre-existence has been respected to the point that still nowadays it is possible to see, on the western elevation, the walled arched windows of the 16th century building. The main portal of the palace and the entrance to the church have been preserved as well. Solari organised the development of the façade on three storeys, visually divided in two parts: the main front overlooks Piazza Quadrivio, whereas the rest of the elevation runs along Via del Gesù. The two are separated by an arched passage that connects Palazzo Sertoli to the old house of the Merlo Family. Both parts of the façade are characterised by the same two-toned look, given by the plastered wall and by the green stucco around the windows, that is extremely similar to that of Palazzo Malacrida. Seen the irregular unfolding of the elevation, Solari made the attempt to apply the baroque symmetry at least to the segment on the square and designed a central vertical band that brought together the portal and the two big windows of the ballroom. Two couples of side windows complete the scheme of the façade, even though the result is far from having the graciousness of Palazzo Salis Tagstein or of the original project of Solari himself.

Interior Organisation

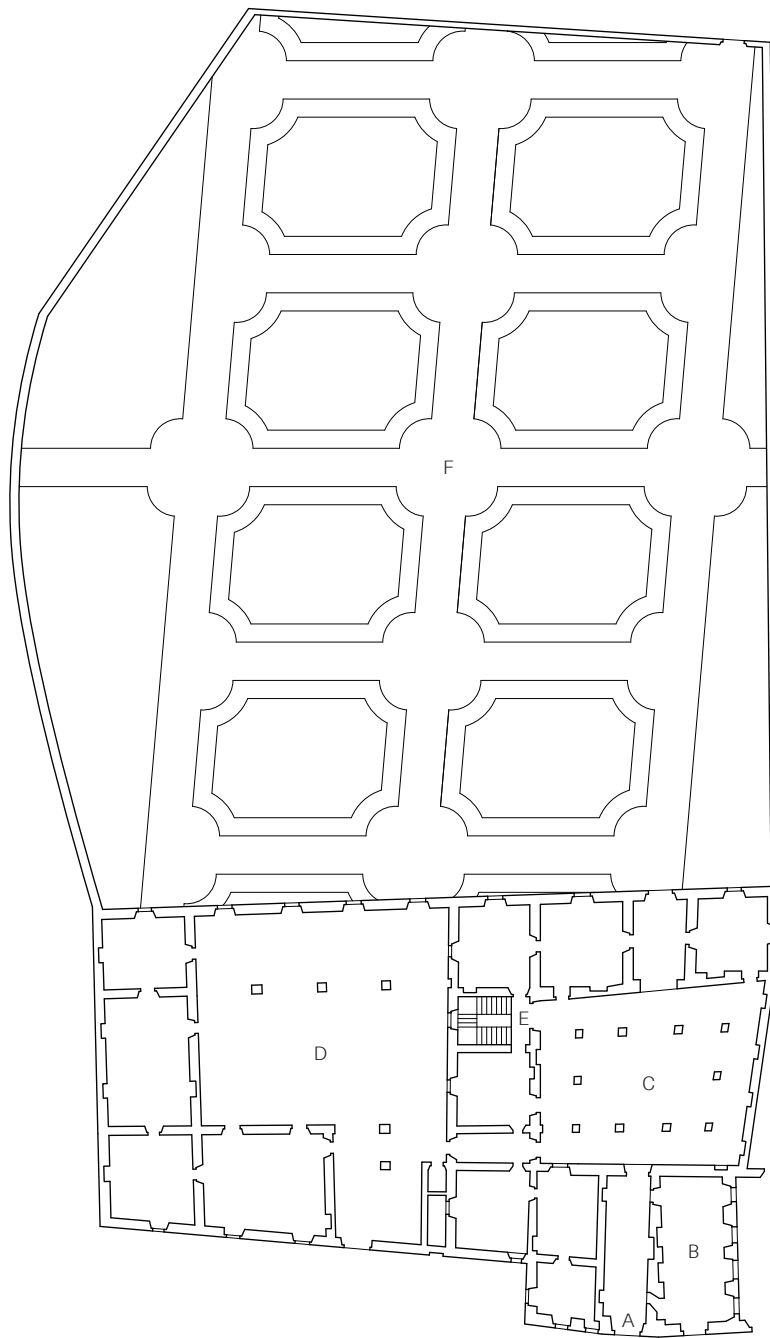
Despite the various buildings he had to unify, Pietro Solari has been able to conceive a baroque central plan organised around two courtyards: the grand staircase of the palace is located, similarly to Palazzo Salis, between the two. The first yard can

be reached by passing through the portal on Piazza Quadrivio and a long vaulted hallway, of the sort already seen in Palazzo Sassi De' Lavizzari. Like the latter, another central passage gives access to the back garden. If seen in plan the courtyard is irregular, but Solari preferred to maintain the same width all around the loggia rather than imposing a regular shape that would have originated bizarre in-between spaces, as it is the case of Palazzo Besta. Interestingly, a 20-meter-deep well, typical renaissance element, has been discovered within the Rustic Courtyard. Elements of irregularity are also present in the most important room of the palace, the ballroom, whose paintings give the illusion of a perfectly symmetrical space. Its architecture is very similar to the examples of Morbegno and Chiavenna, whose realisation took place in the very same years. The other numerous 18th-century parlours that characterise the palace are decorated by frescoed lower vaults: their structure, made of radial thin wooden profiles that rely on a central elliptic ridge beam⁵², can be observed also in the *Saloncello* of Palazzo Salis.

Garden

If it had survived, the Italian garden of Palazzo Sertoli would have rivalled the one of Palazzo Salis in magnificence and dimensions. Like the latter, the visitor could glance it already when stepping into the hallway, even though the side position would have concealed the central perspective. Unknown are the reasons that brought Solari to draw the parterre slightly inclined towards west, maybe to better respond to the irregular shape of the plot.

52 Ibid., 20.



Ground Floor



Palazzo Malacrida

Via Malacrida 6, I-23017 Morbegno

Pietro Solari, 1762

292 masl



North Elevation

Historical Notes

The Malacrida family moved to Morbegno only in mid-17th century. As it happened for Palazzo Salis, also Palazzo Malacrida was born from the will of one member of the homonym family, Ascanio I, who wanted to have a mansion that could affirm the prestige of his lineage. In order to do so, his father Bartolomeo III had already bought some properties in the oldest part of the city, the Scimicà district⁵³, between the creek Bitto and the route leading to the San Marco Pass, on the Orobic side of the valley. This was in fact a strategic position, since it was the meeting point of the Via Priula, connecting Morbegno with Bergamo

and the Republic of Venice, and the route to Como and Milan. Despite the acquisition of the plots was carried on since their arrival in the city, just like Johann Salis Ascanio I didn't live long enough to see the building finished: his work was carried to completion by his son, Giampietro, who had entrusted the task to Pietro Solari⁵⁴.

Façade and Surroundings

Unlike the proposal for Palazzo Sertoli in Sondrio and the baroque principles of the time, the façade of Palazzo Malacrida is extremely sober in its simple plaster coating. This is a common

53 Associazione Culturale Ad Fontes, "Il Palazzo Malacrida."

54 Coppa et al., *Civiltà Artistica in Valtellina e Valchiavenna. Il Settecento*, 177.



10 20 40

Siteplan



character of Lombard palatial architecture, that concentrates more on the enrichment of interior spaces rather than on the outer façade⁵⁵. The firmness of the elevation can be perceived already from the centre of Morbegno but it never unveils itself in its entirety, due to its location in a steep and narrow street that prevents any comprehensive glance. The building is articulated on three storeys and an attic, with a central portal that marks the symmetry of the façade. In fact the research of an absolute symmetry drastically gained in importance in the 17th and 18th century, whereas the renaissance buildings often avoided excessive uniformity in order to obtain specific visual effects. Beside their regularity, the windows of Palazzo Malacrida have re-

markable dimensions (up to 2 metres on the second floor) and testify the importance of natural daylight in a zone that remains rather cold and dark throughout wintertime. The window element, differentiated between ground and upper floors, conveys a sense of unity to the front and does not leave any hints of the incorporated existences. Very elegant is the contrast between the green stucco frame of the openings, the granite sills and the whitewashed coating: such expressiveness is lost on the rear façade, where the symmetry is not respected and the windows lose their decorations. Nevertheless, it is descending through Via Malacrida that it can be admired the genial touch of Solari: in order to hide a protruding part in the rear of the building, the

55 Bascapé and Perogalli, *Palazzi Privati di Lombardia*, 23.

A - Atrium	P - Bedroom
B - Pantry	Q - Bathroom
C - Kitchen	R - Chapel
D - Main South Courtyard	S - Hall of the Three Graces
E - <i>Stüa</i>	T - Loggia
F - Aurora Hall	
G - <i>Studiolo</i>	
H - Secondary Staircase	
I - Horses Courtyard	
J - Main North Courtyard	
K - <i>Cànovè</i>	
L - Main Staircase	
M - Hall of Honour	
N - Stucco Room	
O - Paintings Room	

Lombard architect added a small annex surmounted by a balcony connected to the first floor, whose boundaries are delimited by a refined Viggiù stone balustrade of *rocaille* style⁵⁶. The balcony overlooks a courtyard, whose outer wall is treated differently from the rest of the complex and does not alter the overall proportions of the palace. The only element that could suggest the belonging to the plot is the arched stone portal: unlike Palazzo Salis, where the importance of the main entrance had to be marked with a more decorated frame, the lower position of the second portal does not impeach the predominance of the main entrance, despite their similarities.

Interior Organisation

The plan is organised around a T-shaped nucleus, whose longer side takes up the whole façade of the palace. On the ground floor the central branch is constituted by the atrium and the pantry, while the two sides are occupied by the grand staircase and the Aurora Hall. Juxtaposed to this main figure find place the secondary staircases and the other rooms of the mansion. Entering the atrium from the street, both the stone paving and the granite columns supporting the low arched vaults communicate the building's alpine identity: the use of exposed stone for these elements is in fact a feature that survives from the local medieval architecture and is taken up by both renaissance and baroque culture. The real gem of the palace is indeed the Hall of Honour, placed right above the atrium and developing

on two floors. This quadrangular space is decorated by baroque frescoes that, like the *Salone d'Onore* of Palazzo Salis or the *Teatrino* of Palazzo Salis Tagstein, invite the gaze of the beholder to go beyond the physical walls on which they are painted. Overall, the architecture of the palace shows the influx of Borromini's oeuvre, expressed in the merging of structure and decorations⁵⁷. The spaces are expanded by illusory perspective effects, while the structure is lightened by stucco decorations.

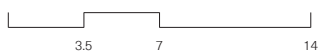
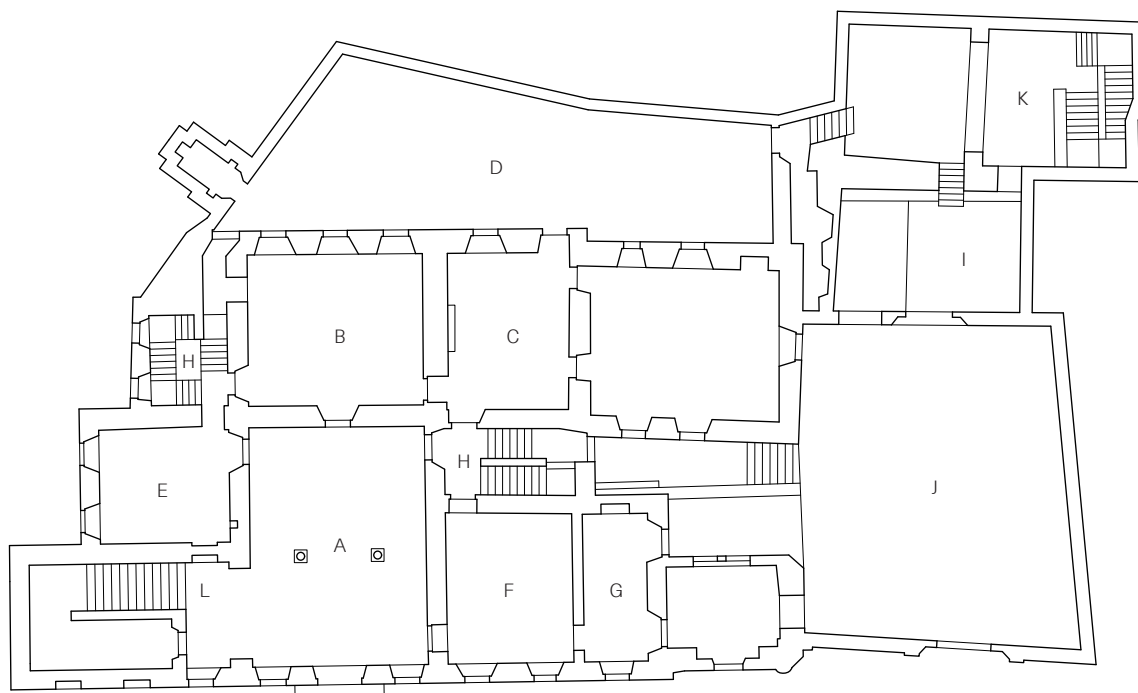
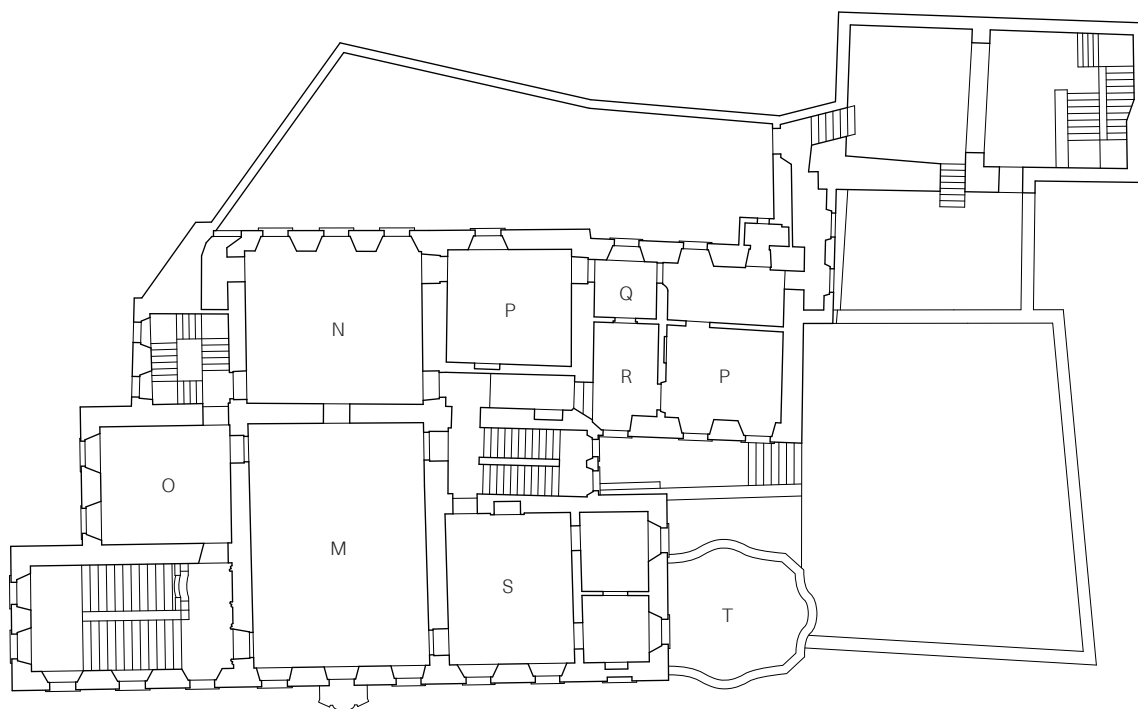
Garden

Protected from the outside is the garden, located between the main body and slope of the mountain. A big wall was already erected by Ascanio I in order to protect the house from humidity⁵⁸: organised on three levels of terraces, the backspace is accessible from the second floor of the house. A classical Italian garden is adapted to the unusual situation of the mountainous environment, giving birth to a unique solution of stone balustrades and to a circulation made up of stairs, that recall the wine terraces of the opposite side of the Alps. The upper part of the garden is occupied by an orchard, within which a small leisure pavilion is integrated: in a couple of centuries this typology has abandoned the language of the dovecote and has become a small piece of architecture in itself, that can betray the stylistic principles of the main palace.

56 Negri et al., *Palazzi Signorili nella Rezia Italiana*, 166.

57 Evangelina Laini, *Il Palazzo Malacrida* (Morbegno: Ad Fontes, 2015), 43.

58 Giulio Perotti, *Palazzo Malacrida* (Morbegno: Cooperativa Turistica PAN, 1992), 173.



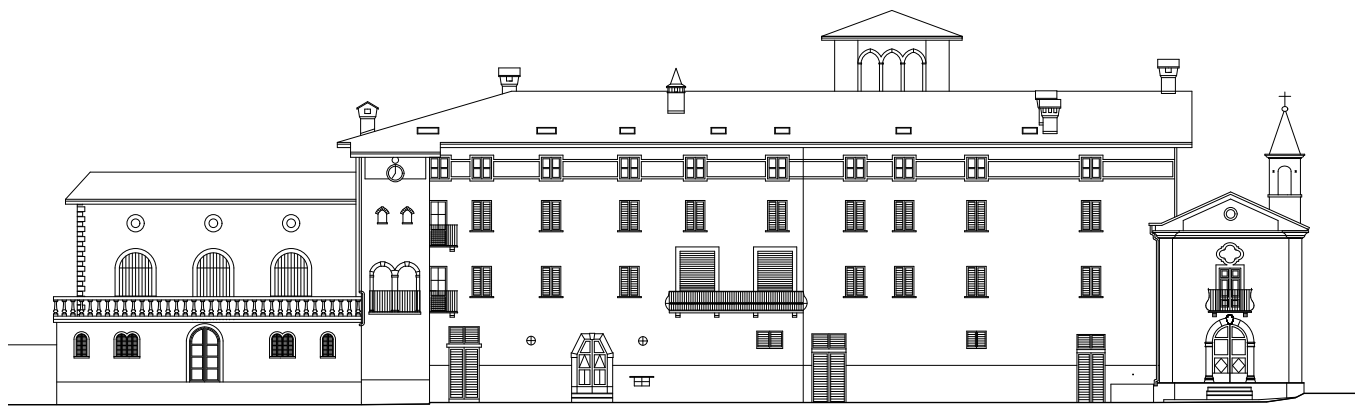
Ground and First Floor

Tenuta La Gatta

Via La Gatta 33, I-23030 Bianzone

16th Century, 20th Century

499 masl



South-East Elevation

Historical Notes

In the 16th century a Dominican group of friars established itself in Bianzone¹, on a gentle slope that allowed a wide view towards Tirano. Their task was granting hospitality to wanderers and pilgrims. After the contrasts between Catholics and Protestants, the friars abandoned their estate that became the summer residence of the noble family De Gatti, from which still retains the name². At the beginning of the 19th century, the Swiss Mascioni family bought it and expanded even more the vineyards surrounding the palace, adapting them to the needs of a winery. In 1969 it became property of the Triacca family.

Façade

The position of the building is particularly fortunate: placed on the top of a gentle hill of the Rhaetian side of the Alps, it receives plenty of sun throughout the whole year and makes it an ideal place for the cultivation of the grapes. Despite the many additions that happened throughout time, it is possible to indicate as the oldest part the central four-storey body, whose irregularities in the façade go unnoticed in the elevation but are well readable in the plan. Considering that the stonework was originally left visible and that the building was lower (2 or three storeys maximum), the comparison with the palace of Pedemonte comes

1 Triacca Vini, "Tenuta La Gatta."

2 Clara Castoldi, "La Gatta, Dove il Vino é Anche Storia."



spontaneously. Unlike the latter, the Tenuta La Gatta was provided with chimneys for the evacuation of the smoke and had a single-pitched roof, typical of medieval tower-houses. An element of difference with all the other palaces taken into consideration is the prismatic shape of the portal, whose model is attested also in Palazzo Gadina in Val Bregaglia³.

Interior Organisation

The comparison with the tower-house makes sense especially when looking at the plan: initially the building was composed by an enfilade of irregular rectangular rooms, whose addition one next to the other may have happened gradually. The entrance

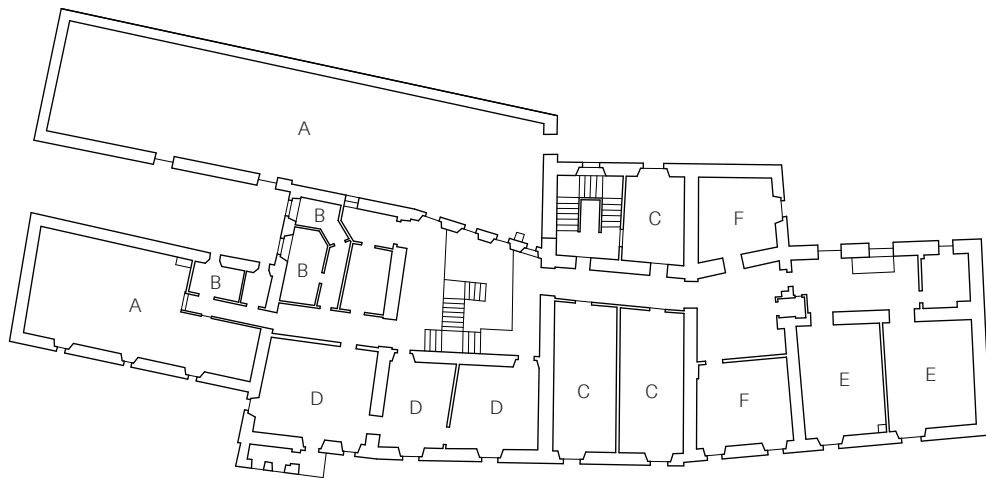
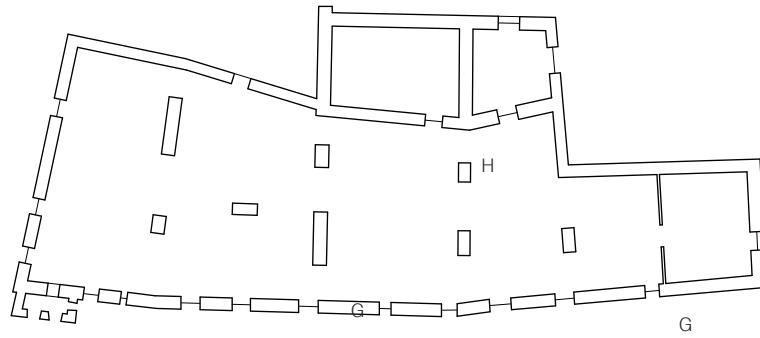
gives access to an atrium, whose dimensions are slightly bigger than those of Palazzetto Besta but whose typology is the same. The spaces of the ground floor are disposed in a row parallel to the mountain side. It is hard to assign a function to each room because they all roughly have the same dimensions: they were probably hosting service spaces, like kitchens and cellars, like it happens in Palazzetto Besta. New spaces for the wine barrels have been added in recent time, as can be seen by the regularity of the western annex. From the vestibule, a single-ramp stair reaches the first floor. Once on the upper storeys, the original fabric is harder to recognise because the anonymous sequence of spaces had been eventually tailored to host specific activities.



Ground and First Floor



- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| A - Entrance | H - Studio |
| B - Utility Room | I - Pantry |
| C - Cellar | J - Farmer's Room |
| D - Hall | K - Living Room |
| E - Service Room | |
| F - Farmer's Kitchen | |
| G - Dinette | |



Second and Third Floor

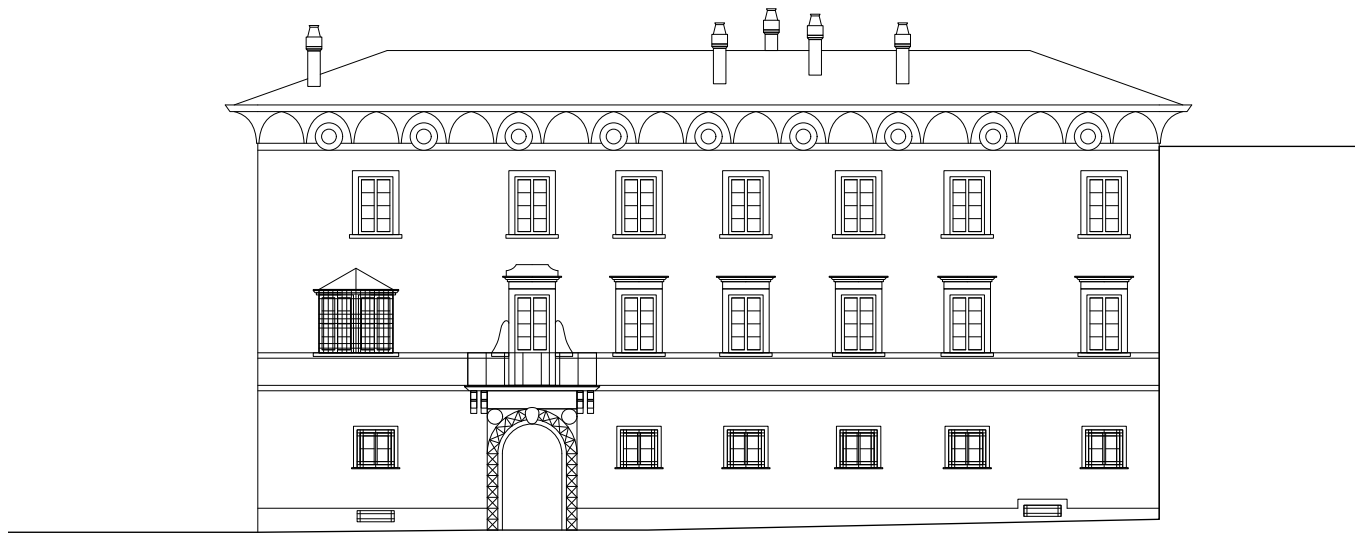


- A - Attic
- B - Service Room
- C - Utility Room
- D - Bedroom
- E - Farmer's Room
- F - Day Labourer's Room

- G - Deposit
- H - Tower

Palazzo Pretorio

Piazza Campello 1, I-23100 Sondrio
1553, 1915-17
299 masl



East Elevation

Historical Notes

The origin of Palazzo Pretorio are very old and can be traced back to the 11th century. It is cited in the chronicles as the residence of the Pellegrini family, from which the local community bought it in 1552 to make it the residence of the Grison governor. Some modifications in the layout gave it the 16th century structure that we can still see today and further expansions were carried on after 1643¹. With the expulsion of the Grisons from Valtellina and Valchiavenna in 1797, it was chosen to host the organs of the local court of justice, until it was acquired by the municipality of Sondrio and became the seat of its offices. During the construction of the road to the Stelvio Pass in 1816,

the southern front of the building was moved two metres back in order to make space to the current Corso Italia, cutting abruptly the inner spaces and originating an inexpressive façade that had been left unresolved for a century. The actual state of the edifice was reached in fact after the restoration of 1915 carried on by the engineer Antonio Giussani, who sought to reinterpret the palace according to other historical monuments of the 16th century. The same Giussani intervened also on the realisation of the attached Palace of Justice.

Façade

It is very difficult to make considerations looking at the actual

¹ Antonio Giussani, *Iscrizioni e Stemmi del Palazzo di Giustizia e del Pretorio di Sondrio* (Como: Tipografia Editrice Ostinelli, 1917), 22.



state of the building without wondering what elements the restoration has kept, what has enhanced and what has more drastically introduced anew. A tool of comparison is a rare picture of the building before 1915, as attached by the Giussani himself to the documentation of the refurbishment². The first element whose lack can be immediately remarked is the pictorial and sgraffito decoration, deliberately introduced by the engineer and inspired by the façade of Palazzo Besta. A thin cornice marks the height of the first floor, element that can be observed also in the nearby Palazzo Sassi De' Lavizzari, while

the painted stripe that runs all the length of the building is inspired once again from the palace of Teglio. From the same reference are also taken the lunettes under the roof³, that ennoble the unfortunate addition of the second floor that took place in the 19th century⁴. The whole roof has been reconstructed with wooden beams and stone slabs as it was before, and numerous chimneys copied from local references were added to complete the eastern front. Concerning the rhythm of the façade, the position of the windows was maintained and a couple of new ones were introduced to enhance even more its regularity. Left

2 Ibid., 7.

3 Ibid., 15.

4 Giussani, *Progetto di Costruzione d'un Palazzo di Giustizia e di Sistemazione del Pretorio quale Sede del Municipio di Sondrio*, 7.

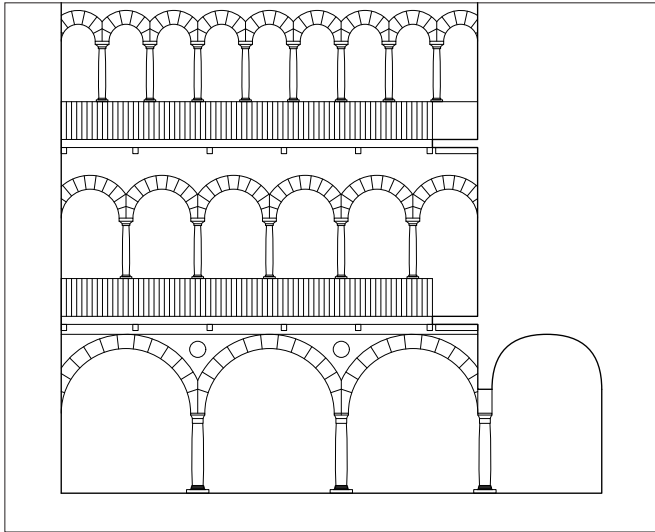


Fig. 35 - North Elevation of the Inner Courtyard

of the portal, the symmetry has eventually been broken by the installation of a *stüa*, whose dimensions did not correspond to those of the room and required an enlargement of the window. It could be said that the only original element of the façade still present nowadays is the arched portal that, as in other palaces of Valtellina, is made of green stone of Tresivio. Even this element has not survived in its entirety: the upper part was in fact destroyed to make room for a balcony.

Interior Organisation and Courtyard

More invasive than the restoration, the cutting of the southern façade has mutilated the C-shape structure of the palace. However, the original form of the premises survive: despite its construction happened through three phases⁵, starting from the side bordering with Casa Guicciardi, the overall proportions are coherent. The offset entrance hall, well attested feature of Lombard architecture, is symmetrically counterbalanced by the grand staircase; this central core is flanked by the two aisles of the palace. The different age of construction can be nevertheless seen in the loggia of the courtyard, whose three sides have different expressiveness: the northern one is supported by arches relying on columns, the eastern one by pillars while the third one is completely closed⁶. Giussani intervened by opening the walled loggia on the first floor, whose rhythm is double that

of the ground floor just like in Palazzo Besta and in Casa Carbonera. Other than that, he added another storey on which he opened a loggia with nine arches⁷, whose columns look clumsy and alter the original proportions of the inner façade. Foreign to renaissance architecture is the balcony, supported by stone cantilevered elements, that overlooks the courtyard from all the three sides. It is possible to observe a similar solution on the first floor of Palazzo Guicciardi, where a long gallery has been introduced in the 19th century⁸. The spaces on the ground floor of Palazzo Pretorio are the oldest ones of the whole building and all present vaulted ceilings; some of their frescoes have survived the interventions. On the contrary, almost nothing original is left on the first floor: also the excellent example of *stüa* that hosts the office space of the mayor was introduced in the mid-20th century and was originally placed in the Casa Rigamonti, not far from the palace⁹.

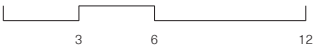
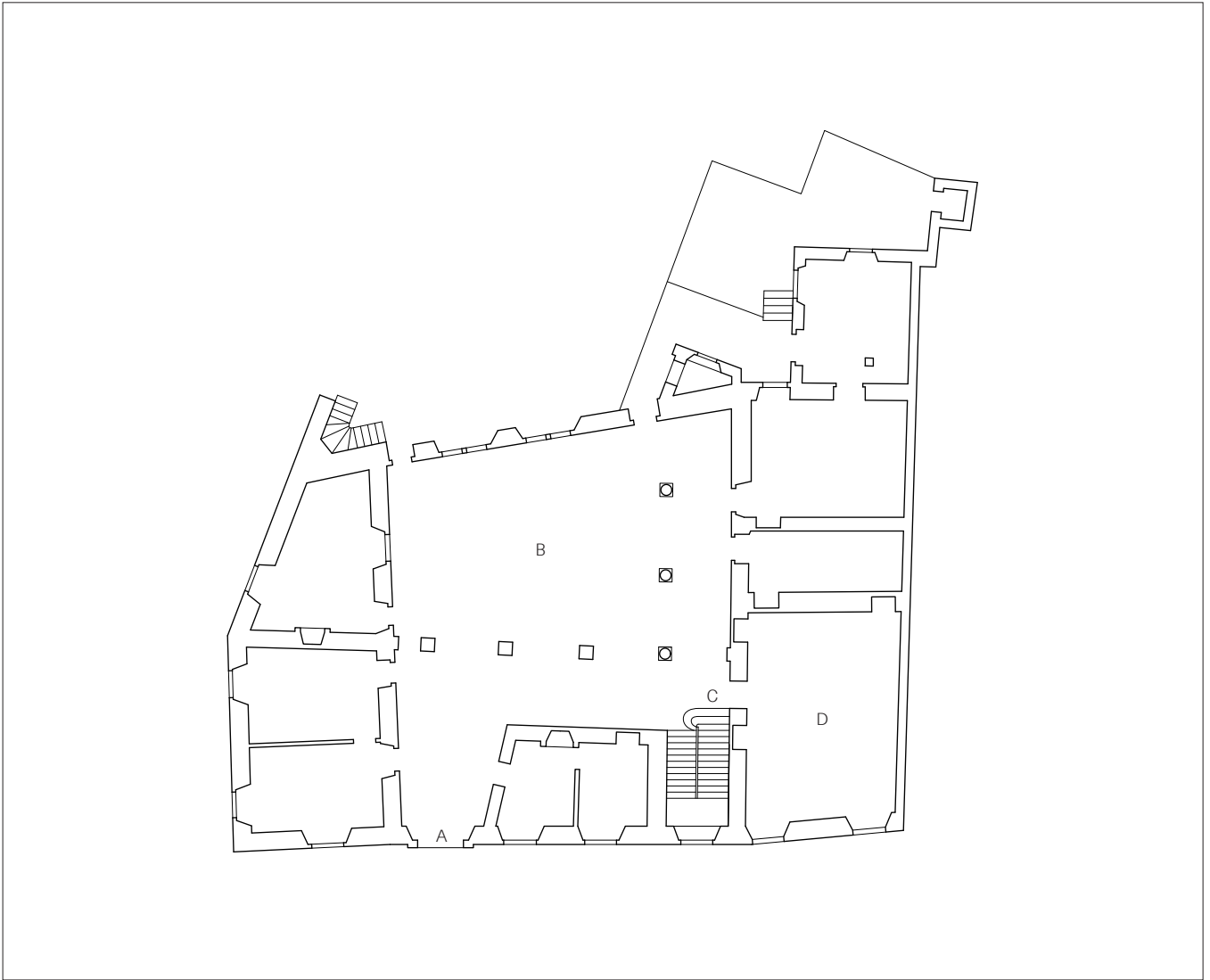
5 Giussani, *Iscrizioni e Stemmi del Palazzo di Giustizia e del Pretorio di Sondrio*, 38.

6 Ibid., 38.

7 Ibid., 38.

8 Beti et al., *Palazzi Signorili nella Rezia Italiana. Volume 2*, 142.

9 Dario Benetti et al., *La "Stüa" nella Rezia Italiana* (Sondrio: Edizioni World Images, 2011), 158.



Ground Floor



- A - Entrance
- B - Courtyard
- C - Staircase
- D - Vaulted Hall

La reina adunque con lento passo (...) prese il cammino (...) ad un bellissimo e ricco palagio, il quale alquanto rilevato dal piano sopra un poggetto era posto (...) e veduta l'ampissima e lieta corte di quello, le vòlte piene d'ottimi vini e la freddissima acqua ed in gran copia che quivi surgea, piú ancora il lodarono. (...) Appresso la qual cosa, fattosi aprire un giardino che di costa era al palagio, in quello, che tutto era da torno murato, se n'entrarono; e parendo loro nella prima entrata di maravigliosa bellezza tutto insieme, piú attentamente le parti di quello cominciarono a riguardare. Esso avea dintorno da sé e per lo mezzo in assai parti vie ampissime, tutte diritte come strale e coperte di pergolati di viti, le quali facevano gran vista di dovere quello anno assai uve fare.

Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decamerone* (Naples: Tipografo del Terentius, 1470).

Villa

Rebirth of a Type

The typology of the villa, which had reached a precise codification in Roman times, disappeared completely during the Middle Ages, with the demise of a single central power that could guarantee the safety of the countryside. The rediscovery of the villa took place in parallel with the rediscovery of Greek-Roman culture in the Renaissance, when clashes between factions gave way to the birth of the municipal seigniories. Just like the *palazzo*, also the villa is a peculiar Italian phenomenon¹: the villa was a place of *otium*, opposed to the *negotium* that happened in the palace, but also a place of agricultural activity as Leon Battista Alberti thoroughly describes in his treaty on the topic. Some villas were built anew in carefully chosen places to profit from the countryside without being too far from the cities. At the same time, some castles were converted into leisure residences. In fact the countryside mansions were often built starting from medieval pre-existing buildings, which were massively modified but which in any case gave elements of irregularity to the layout. This is evident in the first examples of Tuscan villas, the Medicean ones of Trebbio and Cafaggiolo, that in the mid-15th century still showed characteristics of fortification².

The Villa in the Italian Rhaetia

It has been said that the villa typology was not successful in the Alps because of the lack of the city-countryside relationship³. It may be true that the attestations are not as copious as in other parts of Italy but they are nonetheless present and, considering the harshness of the landscape and the lack of big economic and human resources, they are relevant pieces of architectural culture. It could be added that often a villa is defined as such when it is located in a rural environment but, talking about Rhaetia, this distinction can't work properly, seen the lack of impor-

tant urban centres in its territory. As Bascapé and Perogalli did when they analysed the private palaces of Lombardy, the vast area of Valtellina and Valchiavenna must be seen in itself with the same criteria of a city. The villas taken into consideration are buildings that have been used, or mainly used, as summer residences. In fact the most important noble families all had, if not a villa, a secondary residence where to spend their holidays or flee a danger, like the case of the Guicciardi family during the plague of the mid 17th century. That said, in the Rhaetian context the renaissance influence is rather limited but still present. The importance of Valtellina, but above all of Valchiavenna, as an access route to the transalpine territories and the frequent exchanges with the area of Milan and the Como area meant that renaissance influences managed to penetrate also the alpine territory. However, it was only the patrician and merchant classes that adopted its architectural style, while the rest of the population continued to perpetrate medieval techniques and types of construction. Also the villas, as the Lombard palaces, retain that exterior sobriety⁴ that does not reveal the joyful interior decorations. Important families like the Vertemate showed their wealth through a hunting lodge that attempted to propose a residence of new taste and layout in the alpine area, while some villages surrounded by vineyards transposed the Tuscan landscape within the harshness of the mountains, as it happened in Bianzone. What the Rhaetian villas are missing is the strong cultural character of their central Italian counterparts, where small theatres and tribunes contributed to the diffusion of the humanistic culture⁵. There has been in fact no renaissance court able to attract artists and scholars, with the brief and only exception of Azzo II Besta's entourage, whose architectural heritage belongs as seen to the palace typology. It could be concluded that the villa adopted the new language of the Renaissance but still

1 Pier Fausto Bagatti Valsecchi, *Ville d'Italia* (Milan: Touring Club Italiano, 1973), 184.

2 Azzi Visentini, *La Villa in Italia. Quattrocento e Cinquecento*, 42.

3 Angelini et al., *Beni Culturali della Comunità Montana Valtellina di Sondrio*, 87.

4 Bagatti Valsecchi, *Ville d'Italia*, 192.

5 Ibid., 9.

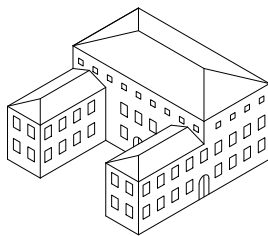


Fig. 36 - Open Courtyard

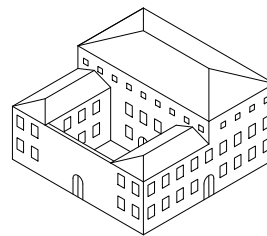


Fig. 37 - Closed Courtyard

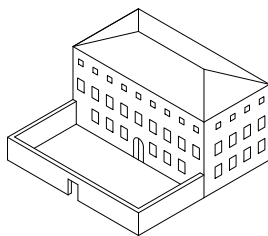


Fig. 38 - Single Body

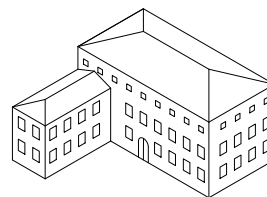


Fig. 39 - L-Shape

retained its medieval character of hybrid between agricultural enterprise and secondary residence.

Countryside Configurations

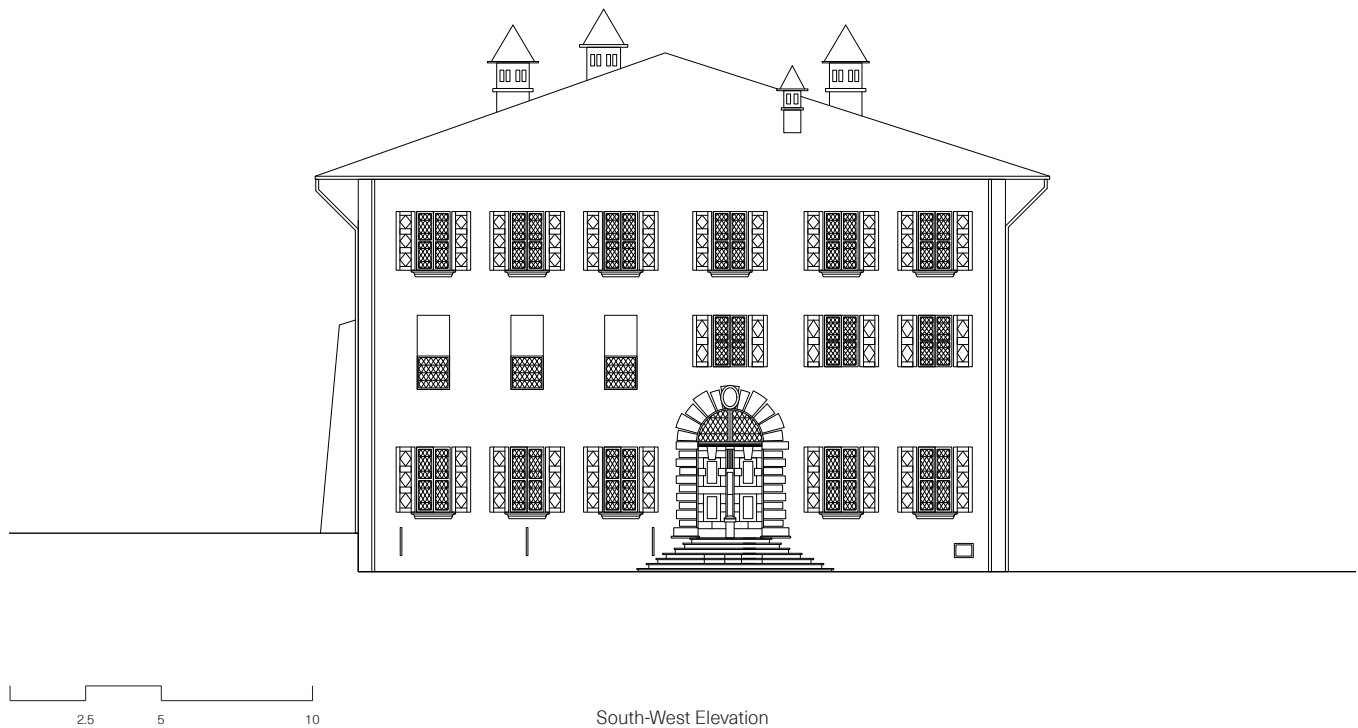
As it happened for the palace, also the villa assumed different configurations according to the period and the location. The different types of palace previously described (see chapter *Palazzo*) are valid also for the villa, with some minor changes. The most common one, very popular all over Lombardy, is the open courtyard typology (fig. 36), among which Villa Cicogna Mozzoni in Bisuschio stands out⁶. The ideal of openness and the desire of admiring the landscape or the gardens are the reasons of its success over the closed courtyard villa (fig. 37), even though in this last case the closing element is often reduced to a wall, like the Guicciarda in Ponte. Frequently attested is also the single body typology (fig. 38), whose simplicity made it suitable for most of the terrains, as it was the choice of the architect of Palazzo Vertemate Franchi. It happens that to a rectangular villa was sometimes added another branch, thus obtaining a plan that resembles a L (fig. 39), see the case of Palazzetto Besta in Bisanzone. Such a richness in the plan configuration takes up the period of time that from the Renaissance reaches the baroque era: after the 18th century in fact, the new villas constantly repeated the U-shaped open courtyard typology⁷. While until then the courtyard and the main axis of the building was orientated to better enjoy the garden, from the 19th century onwards it is the entrance gate that becomes the symmetry axis of the plan development. In the case of Valtellina, this aspect is of interest for the restoration of Villa Visconti Venosta only. In fact with the end of the Grison domination in Valtellina and Valchiavenna in 1797, the Italian Rhaetia lost its cultural and economical unity, as well as part of that social class whose wealth constituted the prerequisite for new architecturally relevant oeuvres. Many palaces and summer residences were confiscated and the local aristocracy gradually lost its power, absorbed by the biggest Cisalpine Republic of which the Alps were just the periphery.

6 Villa Cicogna Mozzoni, "The Villa."

7 Santino Langé, *Ville delle Province di Como, Sondrio e Varese* (Milan: Edizioni SISAR, 1968), 14.

Palazzo Vertemate Franchi

Via del Palazzo Vertemate 35, I-23020 Piuro
1521-77
403 masl



Historical Notes

Together with Palazzo Besta, Palazzo Vertemate Franchi is among the most important residences in the Rhaetian renaissance panorama. It is named after the Vertemate, a family originally from Milan where it was called Della Porta, who after various vicissitudes moved to Piuro in the first half of the 13th century. In the 16th century it was undoubtedly the wealthiest and most respected family in town, to the point that it could afford to have two palaces: the first one was their main residence, while the second one, the object of this research, was merely a summer dwelling just outside of the municipality and for this

reason spared by the landslide that submerged Piuro in 1618. In fact, despite its denomination as *palazzo*, it would be more appropriate to call it a villa, as it was described in the 18th century already: "This house, in comparison with the palace that these gentlemen owned in the same town (...) had the name of a country and pleasure villa"⁸. The palace probably provided also an agricultural function, considering the surrounding wide lands, plots and gardens⁹: such elements underline the importance of the agricultural typology in the panorama of Italian Rhaetia. Accordingly, the annexes to the villa included a grape press, a chestnut dryer and an ice-house.

8 Johann Jacob Scheuchzer, *Beschreibung der Natur-Geschichten des Schweizerlands* (Zurich: Michael Schaufelb & Christoff Hardmeier, 1706), 180.

9 Scaramellini, "Il "Palazzo" Vertemate-Franchi di Cortinaccio in Piuro: una Villa Rinascimentale Suburbana nel Cuore delle Alpi," 16-17.



Surroundings

The relationship of the villa with the territory is influenced by the renaissance ideas of openness towards the territory and its specificities, in contrast with the period of medieval closure and fortification. The amazement of the visitors mainly sprang from the surprise of finding a well-designed and remarkable garden in such a steep territory. As it was written by Marc'Antonio Missaglia at the beginning of the 17th century: "In the ruggedness of the mountains, it would never have been judged that so many beautiful gardens could have succeeded, despite the alpine site"¹⁰.

Moreover, the consideration of the territory leads to the co-

habitation of an Italian-style garden and a chestnut grove, as well as vineyards and vegetable gardens, organized on terraces adapting to and exploiting the roughness of the landscape. These three different expressions of the human domestication of nature are organised in distinct sectors of the estate in such a way that they can be enjoyed from different positions within the house. While from the windows of the main façade the gaze is led towards the entrance to the valley and the vineyards, the Italian garden, together with the orchard and the weir, are located next to the north-west façade. The elevation of the back courtyard, embellished by loggias now closed by windows, overlooks the chestnut grove to the north-east. The view to south-east, the



Section

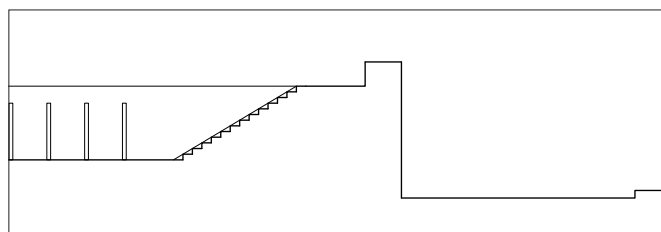


Fig. 40 - Section of the Garuf.

least interesting, looks instead at the service buildings. In this sense the villa goes beyond the palace and can be seen as a rational attempt to apply the concept of geometrical rigour and rationality to the landscape, in the *tabula rasa* of the countryside where no compromise with human artefacts has to be done. Nevertheless, the landscape had to be actively modified. The abundant presence of rocky debris led to the construction of a particular boundary wall, perpendicular on the side on the road and scarped on the inner side, called *garuf*¹ (fig. 40) in the local language. This type of construction makes it possible to both stabilise the stonework and to reflect the sun-rays onto the vineyards, allowing the fruit to ripen quickly. Coming up from the val-

ley, the enclosing walls are the first elements of the complex to be perceived, while the main access is strangely placed on the short side of the fence. Such a choice might result from the explicit effort to prevent a perspective vision of the building in order to incentivize its perception first and foremost as an element of the whole, inserted within a wider area delimited by the surrounding wall. The building is therefore not the only protagonist but one of the many characters of this renaissance architectural play. Once inside the estate, the visitor keeps being guided by the persistence of the walled element, which develops perpendicular to the central axis of the building. At the intersection with it, we are given the choice whether to go down into the garden and the vineyards or to climb up a few steps to enter the villa, underlining in such manner the condition of equality between environment and building. Very interesting is the use of soapstone scraps which, together with pebbles, make up the paving of the paths and of the small courtyards on the rural wing. The working of the *lavecc* (pots carved out of soapstone), the main economical activity of the area, leads in fact to obtain a truncated cone element with a diameter of a few centimetres (fig. 41).

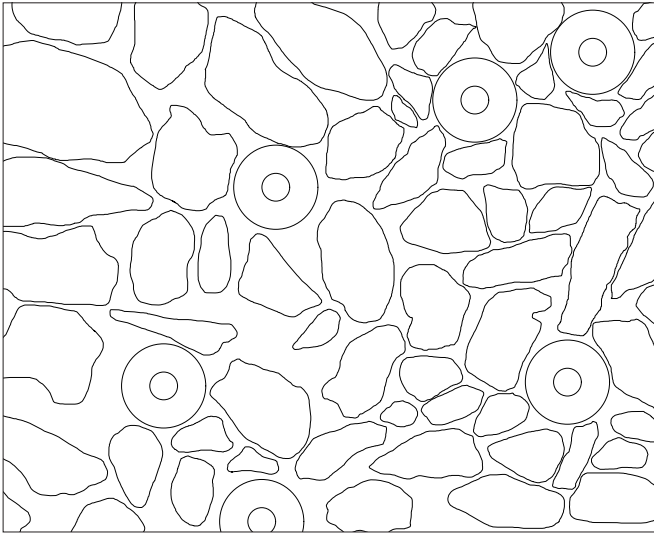


Fig. 41 - Round Soapstone *Lavecc* Scraps in the Paving.

The building technique finds here a meeting point with the local handicraft, of which soapstone was an important resource and on which the trades of the Vertemate were also relying on.

Façade

On the outside, the building appears extremely austere and sober, devoid of any element that might refer to the modulation of architectural elements so dear to the renaissance ideals. Such plainness constitutes a fundamental element of difference with Palazzo Besta, which is the clear result of a conciliation of these ideals with the medieval pre-existence and the characteristics of a less free site. Diego Giovanoli considers its sobriety as a cultural feature of the alpine aristocracy¹². By analysing the façade more in detail, however, it is possible to extrapolate some design principles¹³, the most important of which is the use of the golden ratio (1.618), on which the dimensions of the elevation and the windows are based. The plan of the house was originally squared, with the sole exception of two lateral projections at the rear, which were then further expanded and eventually created the courtyard on the west side. Interestingly, the length of the façade, 21 metres circa, is very close to that of the original nucleus of Palazzo Rucellai. The will of maintaining an appearance of symmetry can be detected in the frame of three walled windows on the left side of the façade, whose

lower and only glazed parts give light to the Salon of Jupiter and Mercury. Unusually for a villa built anew, the portal is not perfectly at the centre of the façade but slightly off-axis on the right: such uncommon position is due to a change of project during construction, confirmed also by a wall present in the cellar¹⁴. The elevation is concluded by a pavilion roof, whose slope is only perceivable from far, and which partially hides the oval oculi of the attic. It could be consequently hypothesised an original different solution for the roof, perhaps similar to the contemporary example of Palazzetto Besta. Likewise also the chimneys, out of stone and without major decorations, recall the local rural examples but are way less elegant than those of Palazzo Besta.

Interior

The internal organisation is quite simple. The principal doorgate allows access to a main corridor, once passable on horseback thanks to the ramp that has been eventually replaced with steps. The visitor's gaze is led towards the inner courtyard, whereas the presence of a staircase on the left, leading to the upper floors, remains initially hidden. This solution is very similar to the one characterising the already mentioned Palazzo Rucellai in Florence, in which the central corridor leads to a loggia opened on the inner courtyard and whose dimensions are comparable to those of the Rhaetian example. In Palazzo Vertemate Franchi more sober Tuscan stone columns replace the Corinthian columns of Palazzo Rucellai, while the frescoed vault, clearly inspired by Roman examples, shows the great degree of sophistication of the client. Despite the erudite citation of an illustrious palace, this type of spatial organisation of the ground floor is well established also in local rural examples¹⁵. Moving towards west, it is possible to observe a configuration similar to that of Casa dei Canonici¹⁶ in Locarno, where the three-storey loggia of the counter façade is made of arches rather than architraves. The unusual presence of flat architraves in the villa may be understood as a citation of the wooden galleries that characterise rural architecture. The only particular note of Palazzo Vertemate Franchi is to be found in its section: it is the different vertical subdivision of the two sides of the house. Giving the back to the vineyards, the left side articulates on two floors, whereas the right side on three. This difference is due to the presence of

12 Giovanoli, *Facevano Case. 1450-1950*, 204.

13 Mulazzani et al., *Il Palazzo Vertemate Franchi di Piuro*, 48.

14 Giovanoli, *Facevano Case. 1450-1950*, 204.

15 Mulazzani et al., *Il Palazzo Vertemate Franchi di Piuro*, 51.

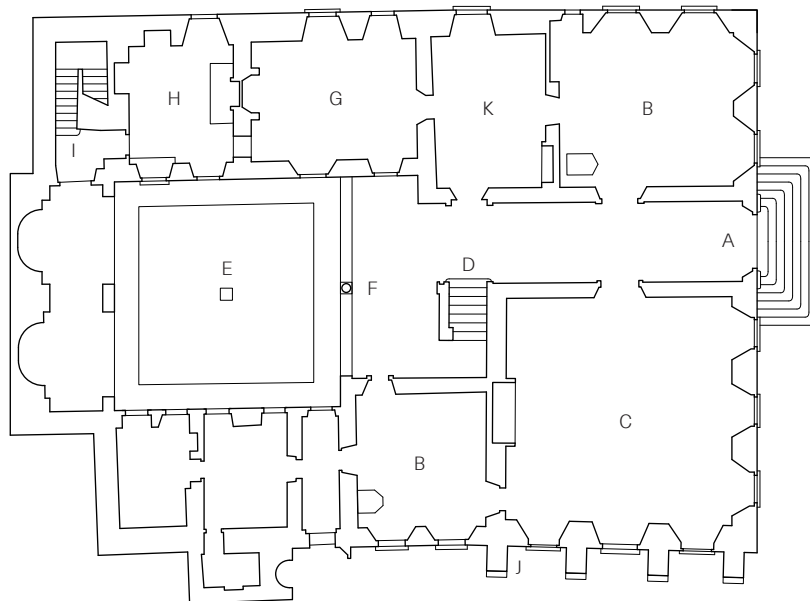
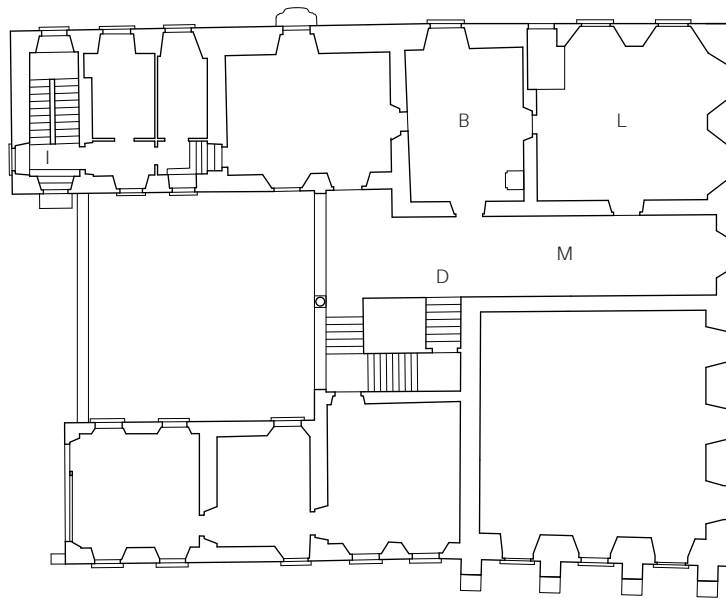
16 Chiesa, *La Casa Borghese nella Svizzera. Cantone Ticino: il Sopraceneri*, 47.

- A - Entrance Gate
- B - *Stüa*
- C - Salon of Jupiter and Mercury
- D - Main Staircase
- E - Courtyard
- F - Loggia
- G - Dining Hall
- H - Kitchen
- I - Service Staircase
- J - Buttresses
- K - Perseus' Room
- L - Napoleon's Room
- M - Corridor

the Hall of Jupiter and Mercury, which can benefit of a double height that will remain as a constant element of the Lombard architecture until baroque time¹⁷. The latter's vault caused structural problems that led to the construction of buttresses leaning against the north-west façade.

The door in front of the described hall introduces to the *stüa*, used in this case as a representative space and adorned by inlaid wooden columns. The wooden cladding stops at a height of approximately 2 metres, over which a frescoed vault develops. A sort of secret cabinet, on the south-east corner, was historically occupied by a notary that could transcribe the important conversations going on in the room. The last element completing the furnishing is a stove, called *pigna*, completely clad with decorated majolica tiles. Next to the *stüa* finds place the kitchen with the pantry, according to a model that is repeated for rural dwellings and noble mansions alike. The wealth of the Vertemate family is also clearly visible in the rooms on the upper floors, adorned with magnificent wooden ceilings, as is the case of the Zodiac Room. The adjacent bedroom, the Bishop's Room, presents a ceiling whose inlaid central body gives access to a secret trap door, used to access it undetected. On the upper floors, a central staircase leads to the beginning of a corridor facing the valley and whose wooden coffered ceiling is designed to give the impression of being much longer, with a taste for perspective similar to that of Bramante in the apse of the church of Santa Maria near San Satiro in Milan.

17 Leoni et al., *Palazzo Sertoli in Sondrio*, 30.



Ground and First Floor

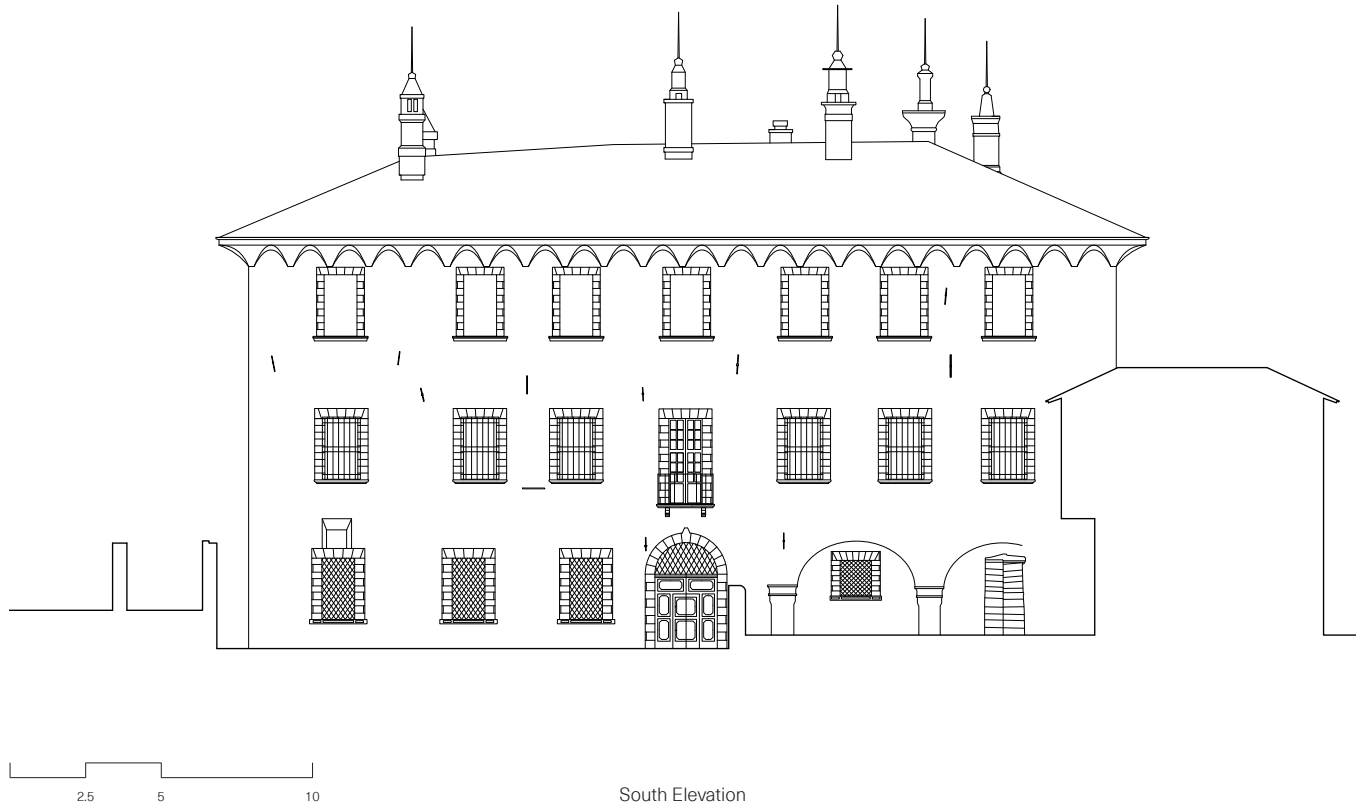


Palazzetto Besta

Via Algherone, I- 23030 Bianzone

16th Century

446 masl



Historical Notes

The first allusions of Palazzetto Besta in the chronicles justify the choice of including it within the villa typology. In fact, it belonged to the noble family of the Alberti which, native of Bormio, used it as a country residence and farm. Other noble families used to have secondary mansions in Bianzone¹⁸. The transfer of ownership to the Besta family, of which it still retains the name, took place in 1568, as testified by the contract between Nicolò II and Girolamo¹⁹, son of Azzo II, the latter author of interventions on Palazzo Besta in Teglio. With the passage to the Besta

family, the palace became a real stately residence, permanently inhabited by Giacomo Besta, who undertook embellishment works and added a floor to the building. Eventually, it belonged to Corradino Planta of Zuoz, to whom it was confiscated at the end of the Grison domination in 1797²⁰. Nowadays Palazzetto Besta is defined with a diminutive to distinguish it from the more famous namesake of Teglio. The relation between the homonym buildings may have been similar to the one that existed between the main residence of the Vertemate family, destroyed by a rock slide, and the hunting lodge known today as Palazzo

18 Sertoli Salis, "Il Palazzetto Besta di Bianzone," 6.

19 Gianluigi Garbellini, "Dagli Alberti ai Besta: le Origini del Palazzetto Besta di Bianzone," *Bollettino della Società Storica Valtellinese*, no. 52 (1999): 109-110.

20 Beti et al., *Palazzi Signorili nella Rezia Italiana. Volume 2*, 306.

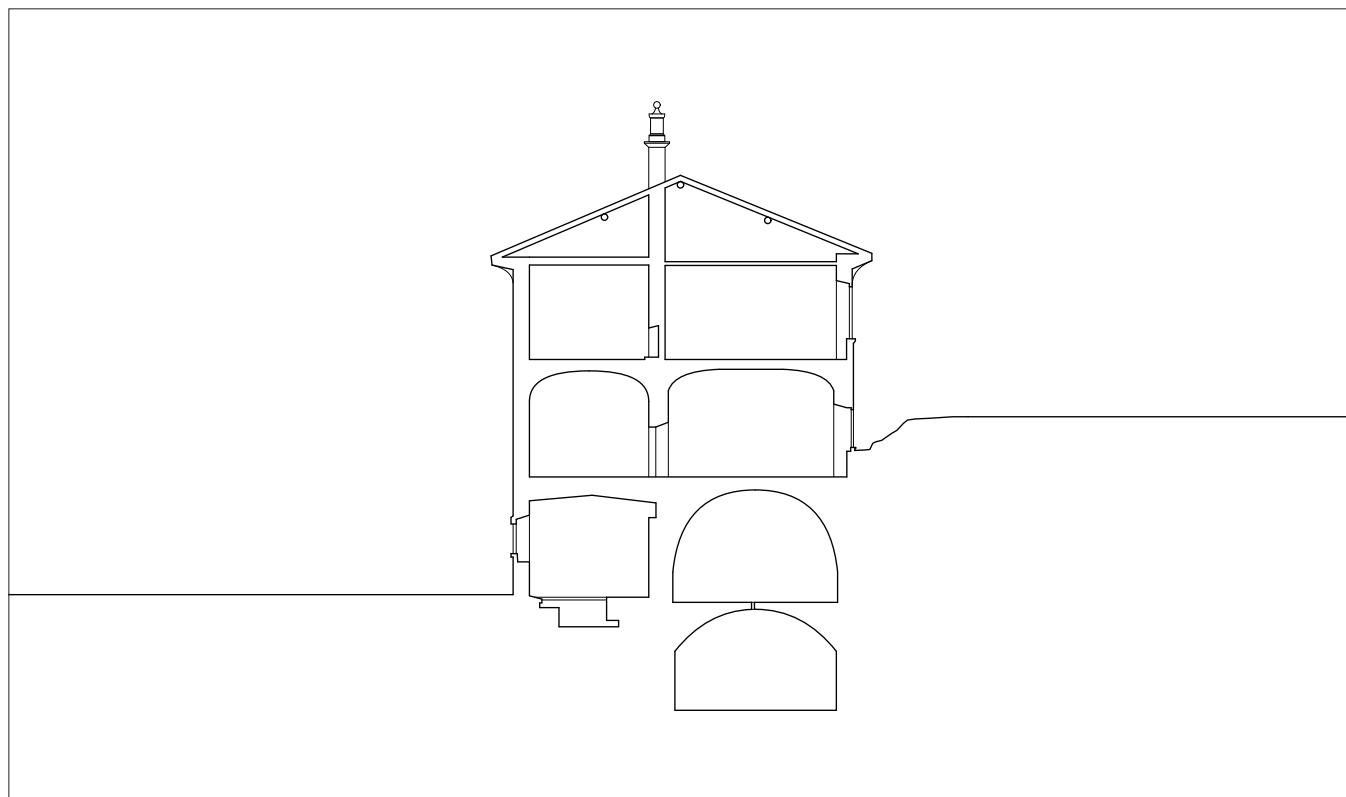


Vertemate Franchi. Little known and in a state of abandonment, except for recent structural adaptations, it testifies nonetheless the renaissance taste applied to a country house.

Façade

The entrance is located on a side path that branches off from the main road, but the massive façade can be already spotted from the valley floor. Therefore, as in the case of Palazzo Vertemate Franchi, there is no central perspective axis but the building is first glimpsed by the side and always in relation with the surrounding wall. Once entered the courtyard through a metal gate, the U shape of the medieval plan reveals itself²¹: the at-

tention is immediately drawn to the remarkable loggia, whose columns are made of the green stone of Tresivio. A plan of this type will be reproduced in the 19th century in the Villa Visconti Venosta in Grosio: in this example the loggia is not opened on a private inner court as it happens in the classic palace typology, but rather on the family's lawns. Unlike the latter, Palazzetto Besta presents a central courtyard divided in two by a 2-meter-high wall, which creates a degree of intimacy to the west wing and partitions the main façade in two. The aforementioned comparison with Palazzo Vertemate Franchi is also valid in the treatment of the façade, although the latter is of greater formal and mathematical refinement. There is no rustication or subdivision into



Section

bands of the elevation, whose sectioning into 3 floors is marked by the windows that all share the same expressiveness, except for the metal gratings whose motif changes from floor to floor. The windows, included the ones in the back, are framed by rusticated ashlar resembling those of the portal and whose importance is not as marked in a refined way as in the example of Piuro. Despite the rusticated green stone had been already bought by the previous owner, Nicolò II Alberti, the installation was carried on and completed only with Giacomo Besta²². Especially on the last floor, added by the latter, it can be seen how the narrow distance between the frame of the windows and the lunettes is badly calibrated, maybe a sign of a last moment decision. Stylistically speaking, the cornice with lunette motif is an element taken from Palazzo Besta, although it does not have the oculi of the latter. On the right side of the ground floor two lowered arches are still visible, supported by low and stumpy pillars probably of medieval construction. On the span, later closed by a wall, were opened both a window of almost squared dimensions and a wooden door of the type findable in barns

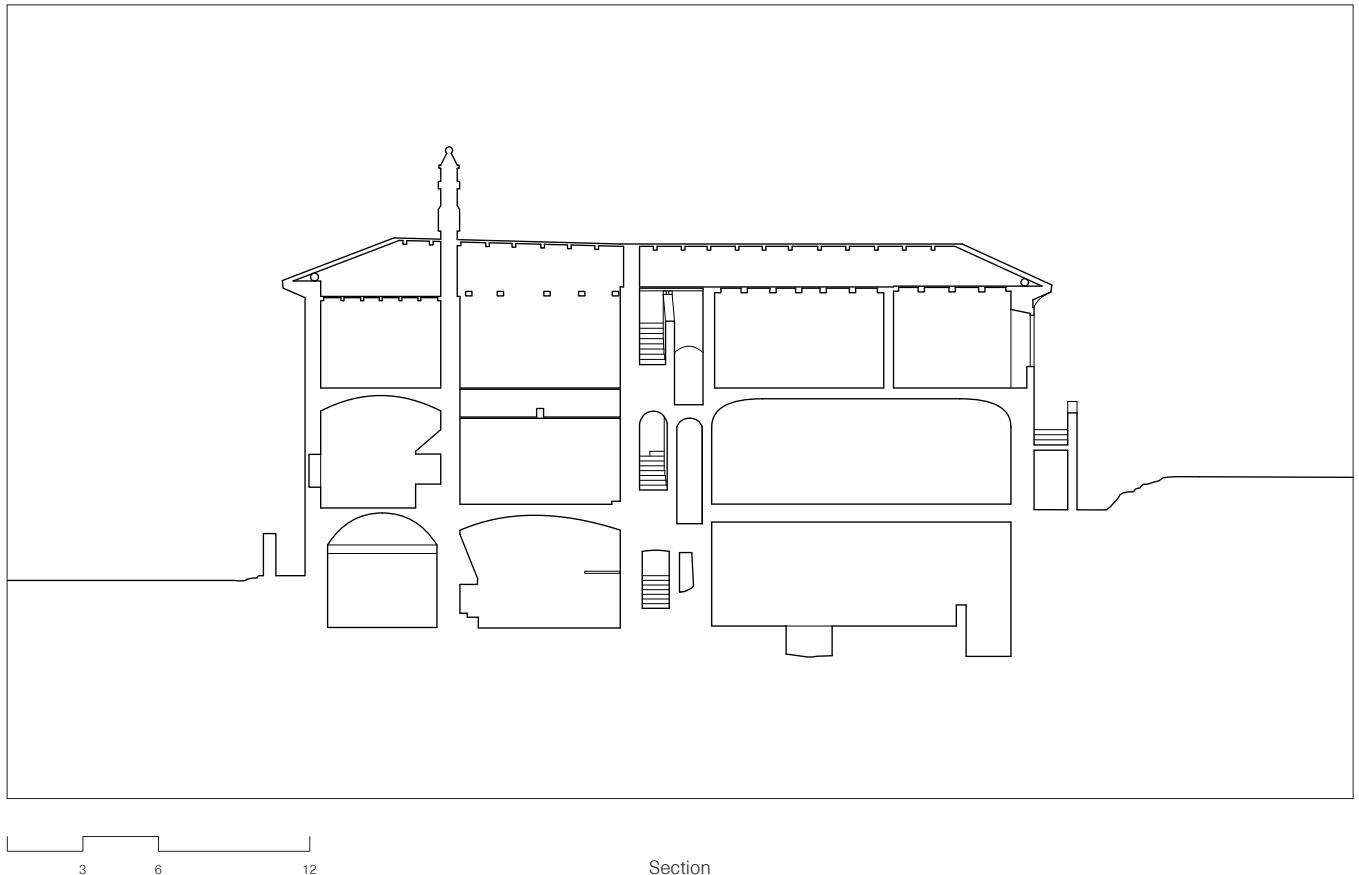
and rural dwellings. The incomplete and clumsy filling of these bays, probably belonging to another loggia, furthermore recalls the famous Michelangelo's intervention in Palazzo Medici Riccardi and witnesses the lower level of refinement of the alpine area compared to central Italy. A similar example can be found in Giubiasco, Canton of Ticino: Casa Tatti²³ shows in fact the same position of the staircase and a loggia running the length of the rectangular plan. Also the section appears very similar, articulated according to the slope that grants a direct access to the exterior from the back of the first floor. Coming back to Palazzetto Besta, above the loggia stands a small tower with a clock and a bulb dome dating back to the 18th century: it should be noted that the construction is in brick instead of stone, which is unusual and rare in the architecture of Valtellina. The main body of the palace is in fact in sober plastered stone.

Interior

The main entrance to the building opens right at the centre of the north body, marked by a sober ashlar portal characterised

22 Garbellini, "Dagli Alberti ai Besta: le Origini del Palazzetto Besta di Bianzone," 117.

23 Chiesa, *La Casa Borghese nella Svizzera. Cantone Ticino: il Sopraceneri*, 24.



by two wooden doors and surmounted by a metallic grille resembling that of the windows on the ground floor. It has been hypothesised that these grilles were originally more refined, of similar workmanship to those of Palazzo Besta²⁴. Once inside, the visitor is welcomed in a narrow atrium, where the presence of a vaulted staircase immediately leads to the upper rooms. The ground floor merely hosts service areas such as the kitchen with the oven, whose typology is not that different from that of Casa Tomé. The kitchen gives also access to the cellars in the underground. The latter were the pride of the building, given also the important wine production of Bianzone, as testified by the document of the sale²⁵. Palazzetto Besta is therefore another example of the hybrid typology, between a residence and a farm, typical of Valtellina. Unusual are in fact the narrow and uncomfortable atrium, perhaps justified by the presence of the garden in front, and the limited size of the main staircase, insufficient for a real stately home permanently inhabited. Paradoxically, the biggest staircase of the house is the one that from the

press room, obtained by closing the loggia, leads to the cellars, since it had to be big enough for the barrels to pass through. Going up to the first floor the first space on the left is the rectangular main hall, decorated by a frescoed pavilion vault and a paving of small square slabs of green stone. The hall overlooks the courtyard and is illuminated by three windows, which correspond in a non-symmetrical way to three doors on the north wall, which lead into as many vaulted rooms. The south-west corner of room is cut to allow the passage over the loggia to the smaller wing of the palace, in a similar way to what occurred in the hall of Palazzo Besta to reach the south-west tower. Both of them are the result of a compromise with the medieval layout. The shell-shaped vault of the main hall takes up that of the dining room of Palazzo Besta and features frescoes depicting scenes from Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*²⁶, a symbol of the humanistic culture of which the Besta felt part. Left of the staircase is placed a *stüa* with a square-motif floor, positioned above the kitchen to take advantage of the heat com-

24 Sertoli Salis, "Il Palazzetto Besta di Bianzone," 8.

25 Garbellini, "Dagli Alberti ai Besta: le Origini del Palazzetto Besta di Bianzone," 114.

26 Sertoli Salis, "Il Palazzetto Besta di Bianzone," 7-8.

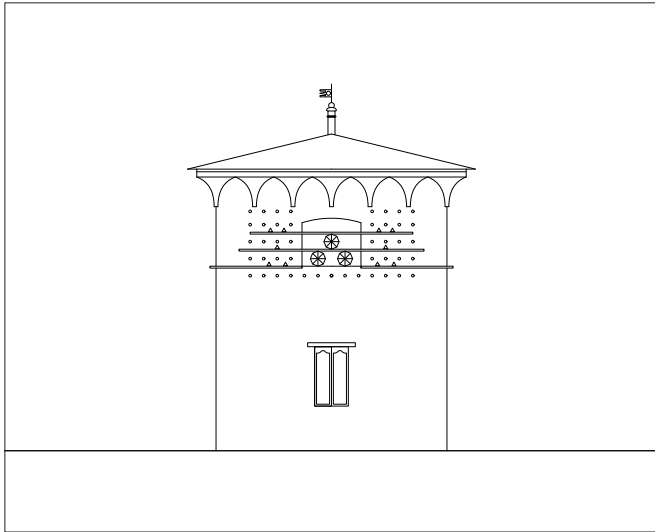


Fig. 42 - The South Elevation of the Dovecote

ing from the floor. From there it is possible to access another vaulted room and various service areas. The second and last floor is similar to the first, except for the presence of a smaller hall and what were probably the bedrooms. The east wing also sees the presence of a *stüa* as well as of three smaller adjoining rooms. In general, it can be observed that the common rooms were paved in stone, the more private ones in lime, whereas the only rooms with wooden cladding were the *stüe*. Some service rooms were simply left in beaten earth.

The roof follows classic local patterns: a wooden structure, with the main beams parallel to the eaves, supports a secondary structure and a slate slab covering. The whole forms a pavilion roof, similar to what can be observed in Palazzo Besta. Tower-like chimneys, of various shapes and sizes, conclude the composition. Although they do not present the level of decoration and refinement of Palazzo Besta, they received particular attention during the embellishment works of the 16th century and constitute a typical feature of Rhaetian architecture²⁷.

Dovecote

Detached from the complex and immersed in the orchard north of the building is the so-called dovecote tower, typical element of the noble residences of the place²⁸. In this case the very definition of dovecote is inappropriate, since it is not a simple rural building but a sort of cottage that only the house-master

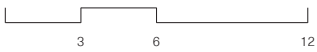
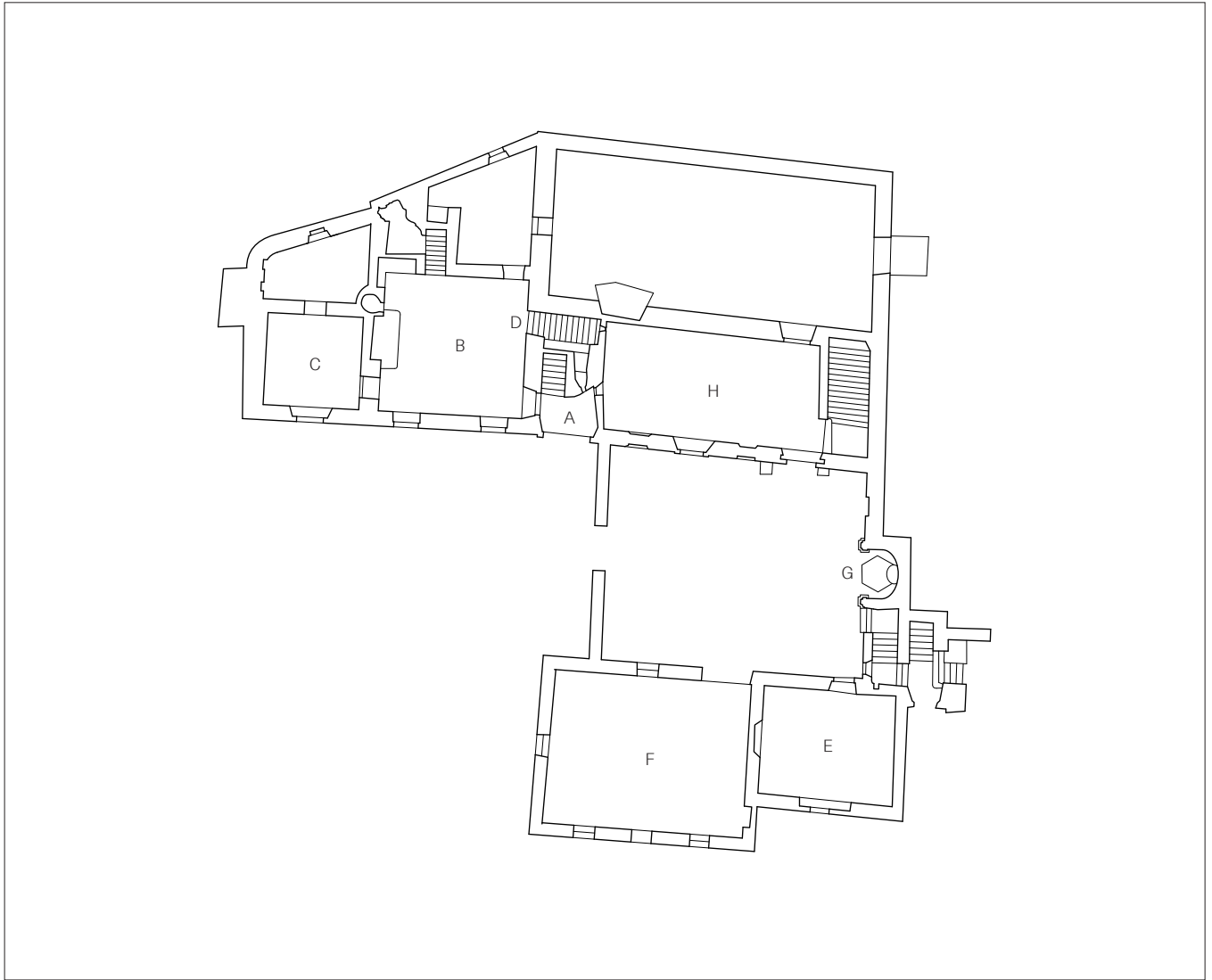
could benefit of²⁹. Together with its shelter purpose, it worked also as a drying room for the fruits. Its importance is testified by the inside paintings on the vaulted ceiling, whose presence is anticipated by the frescoed lunettes that adorn the pyramidal roof: the relevance given to the dovecote towers is a common element in Valtellina, as also Angelini affirmed³⁰. The outside proportions and appearance of the dovecote are extremely similar to the one of Palazzo Salis in Tirano, also placed not far from the main building and adjacent to an orchard.

27 Sertoli Salis, "Il Palazzetto Besta di Bianzone," 7.

28 Garbellini, "Dagli Alberti ai Besta: le Origini del Palazzetto Besta di Bianzone," 115.

29 Ibid., 115.

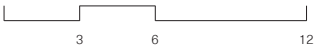
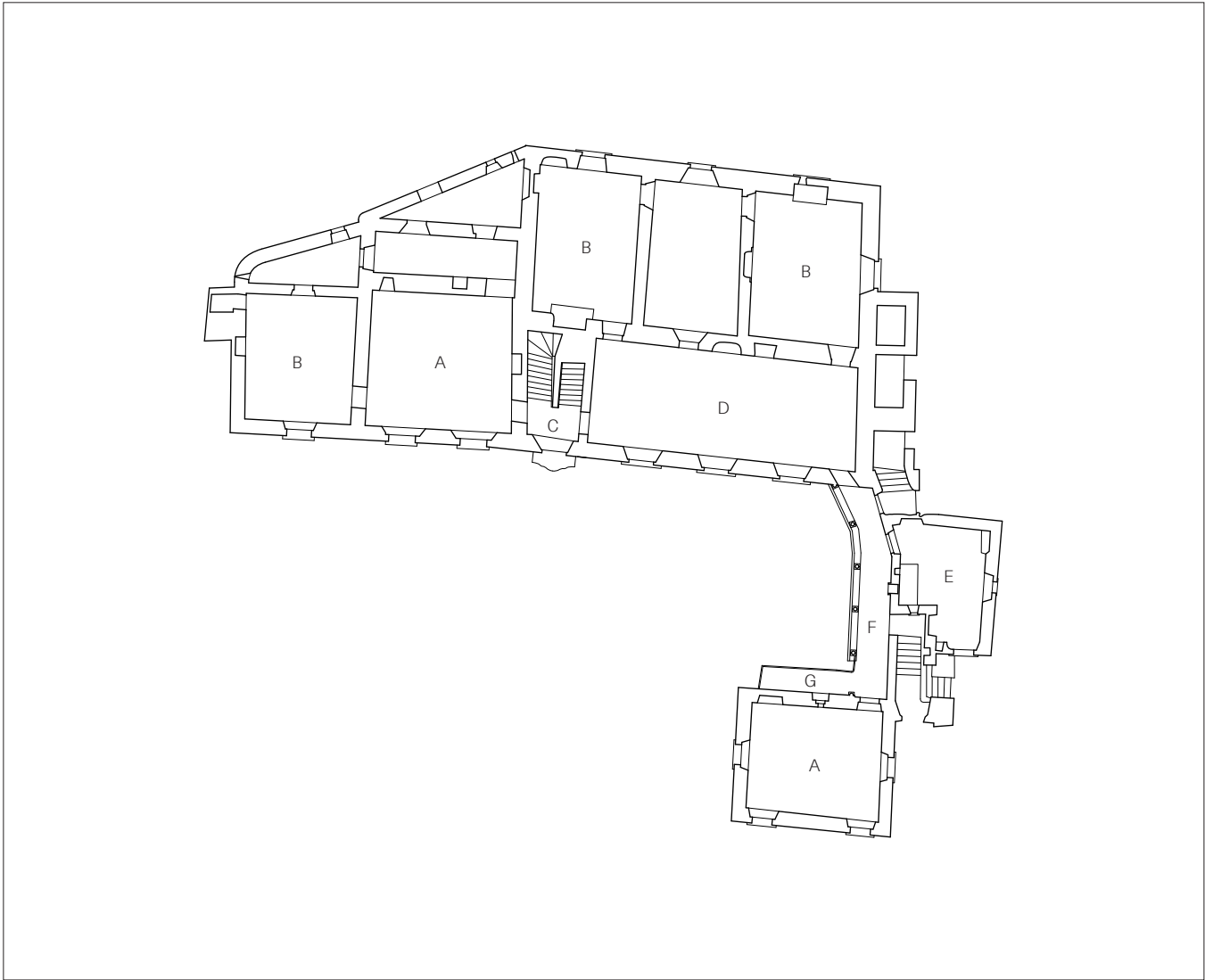
30 Angelini et al., *Beni Culturali della Comunità Montana Valtellina di Sondrio*, 91.



Ground Floor



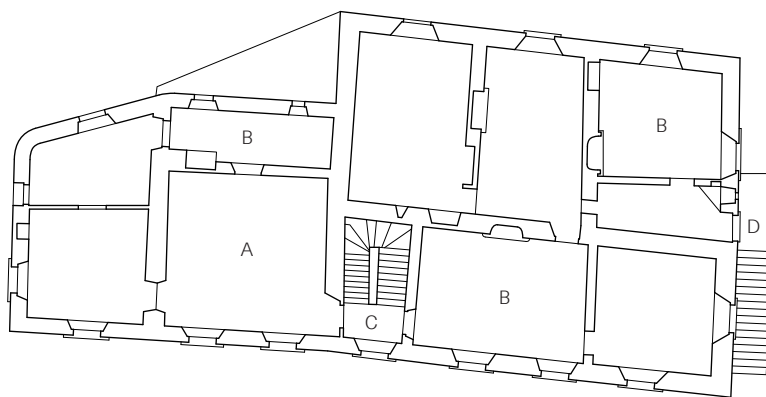
- A - Atrium
- B - Kitchen
- C - *Stüa*
- D - Cellar Stairs
- E - Barn
- F - Rustic Room
- G - Well
- H - Wine Press' Room



First Floor



- A - *Stüa*
- B - Heated Vaulted Room
- C - Staircase
- D - Main Hall
- E - Utility Room
- F - Loggia
- G - Balcony



Second Floor



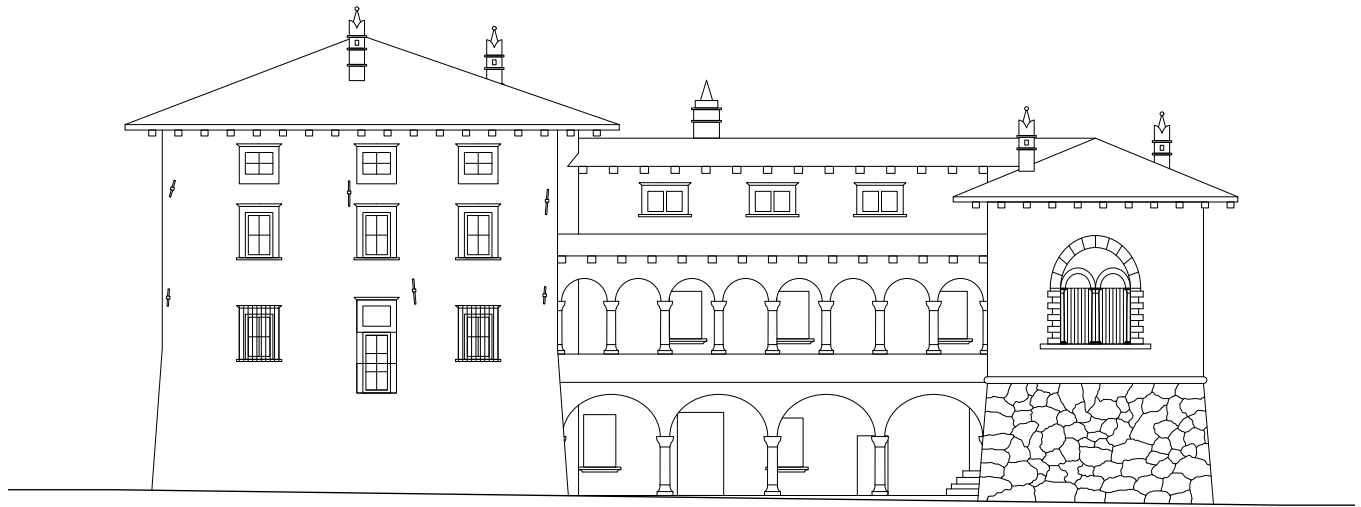
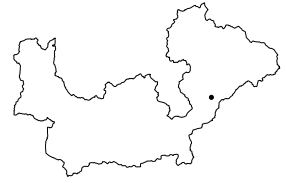
- A - *Stüa*
- B - Heated Room
- C - Staircase
- D - External Staircase

Villa Visconti Venosta

Via Visconti Venosta 2, I- 23033 Grosio

16th Century, 1899-1901

652 masl



South-West Elevation

Historical Notes

Villa Visconti Venosta represents a delicate instance to treat. The oldest part of the complex, what is nowadays the west wing, dates back to the 16th century³¹, since we know it was partially destroyed by a fire during the Holy Slaughter of 1620. Langé remembers some rumours that would attribute an initial function as a convent, later on converted into a noble residence³². In reality this building was nothing but a summer lodging for the Venosta family and for such reason, as well as for its organisation and surroundings, it has been included within the villa

typology.

From another point of view, the case of Villa Visconti Venosta looks very similar to that of Palazzo Pretorio in Sondrio. Both are in fact, in their present form, the result of a historicist wave that reinterpreted medieval or renaissance pre-existing buildings in the period between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. These are the years of the renovation of the Sforza Castle in Milan, as well as of the Casa Bagatti Valsecchi in the same city, edified between the 1883 and 1895 in accordance with 16th century renaissance models³³. It is following this trend

31 Negri et al., *Palazzi Signorili nella Rezia Italiana*, 314.

32 Langé, *Ville delle Province di Como, Sondrio e Varese*, 285.

33 Angelini, "Prima del Museo: Emilio Visconti Venosta tra Collezionismo e Tutela," 59.



that the marquis Emilio Visconti Venosta decided to start the works of refurbishment of his family summer house, dedicating particular attention to the repetition of old local examples and materials as he underlined when he said: “be every element copied from old houses”³⁴.

Façade

Thanks to its position at the limit of the urban centre, the façade has an ambiguous nature between villa and palace, as it has been able to profit from the open spaces in the front which were transformed into the personal park of the Visconti Venosta fam-

ily. Similarly to Palazzo Pretorio, the recent interventions might go unnoticed without a side by side comparison to the previous state of the villa. Its current look has been strongly affected by the 20th century renovation, that added two new branches to the complex and changed the way of experiencing the building. In particular, the central wing has been modelled on the example of the Casa Carbonera in Sondrio³⁵: the new representative façade is constituted by two loggias, whose rhythm is doubled on the first floor. Twenty years later, Giussani operated a similar intervention in the courtyard of Palazzo Pretorio, inspired by the historical forms of Castel Masegra and Palazzo Besta. Beside

34 Letter from Francesco Chiodi, 26 April 1889, Box 145, Folder 6, Archivio Visconti Venosta, Grosio, Lombardy, Italy.

35 Angelini, “Prima del Museo: Emilio Visconti Venosta tra Collezionismo e Tutela,” 60.

A - Porch	P - Weapons Room
B - Main Staircase	Q - Vestibule
C - Former Entrance	
D - Actual Entrance	
E - Well	
F - Secondary Staircase	
G - Loggia	
H - Dining Room	
I - Main Hall	
J - Corridor	
K - Marquis' Room	
L - Marquess' Room	
M - Studio	
N - Library	
O - Guest Room	

these clear citations, Villa Visconti Venosta presents interesting similarities, probably unwanted, with Palazzetto Besta, whose timid U typology brings to mature conclusion. The north-west wing presents in fact a porch on the ground floor that could be compared with the closed one of the aforementioned palace, which also has a loggia connecting its two parallel volumes.

Interior

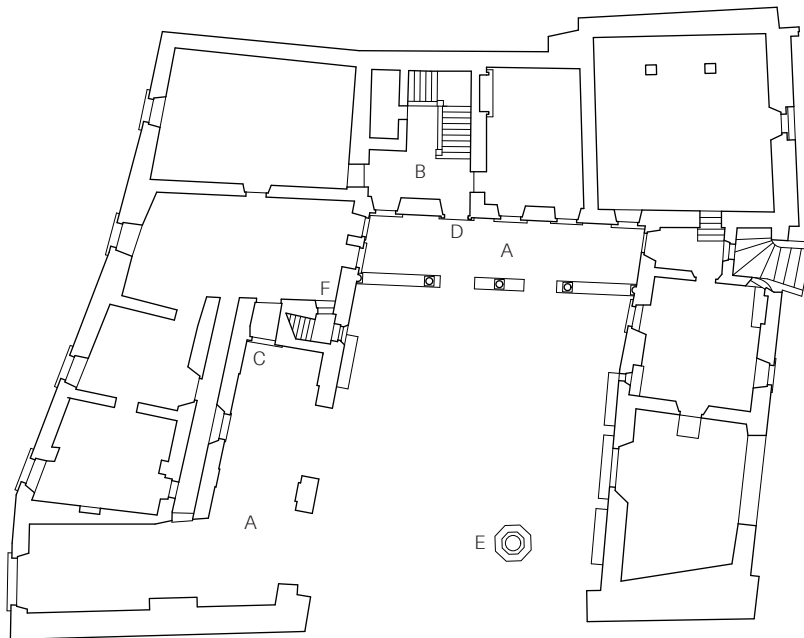
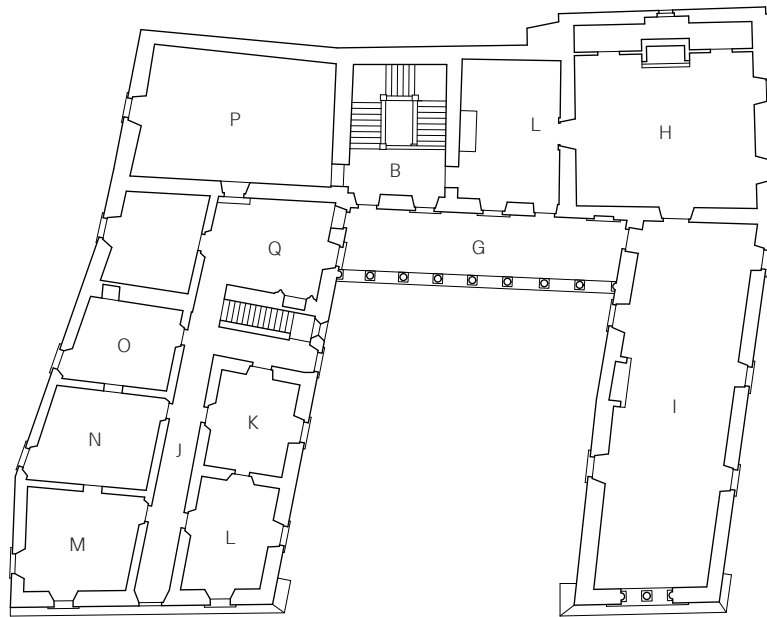
The complex shows a U-shaped plan, typical of the villa of the Lombard territory but a rare example in Valtellina, where closed buildings with internal courtyard were more common because better defensible. The only exception might be posed by Villa Parravicini in Traona³⁶. Its internal layout differentiates the three branches that compose the villa: the oldest is recognisable by the irregular north-west façade and has a corridor system that connects all other spaces. Originally the building, approximately north-south oriented, was probably composed by a sequence of squared rooms, as in the case of Tenuta La Gatta. The corridor ends in a big hall where a stone staircase grants access either to the cellars or to the first floor. Such a big space required a relevant effort at that time and marked the passage from the dark medieval mansion to the bigger spaces of the renaissance period³⁷, that in Valtellina tended to be always of limited dimensions.

Coming from the old centre of Grosio, a stone portal located at the extremity of this branch introduces to a spacious loggia. This being the historical entryway, the modern one passes

through the gate on the west side, and leads the visitor to perceive the complex frontally. Consequently, the most important façade looks nowadays to be the south-west one, to which the access occurs through the central branch and the neo-renaissance loggia. On the ground floor, the central part hosts the main staircase, that recalls that of Palazzo Salis, while on the first floor a vestibule and a second loggia provide access to the dining hall and to the main hall, constituting the south-east wing in almost its entirety.

36 Langé, *Ville delle Province di Como, Sondrio e Varese*, 320.

37 Bascapé and Perogalli, *Palazzi Privati di Lombardia*, 267.



Ground and First Floor



Conclusion

Since the beginning of my research, during the phase in which I was still gathering information about the topic, the element that surprised me the most was the richness of architecturally relevant buildings in the Italian Rhaetia. Finding myself at the end of this journey, my head is still regretting the choice of including a palace instead of another, whose plans may have been more difficult to obtain but whose presence could have given more completeness to the general discourse. The twenty buildings presented in the *Atlas of Typology* are certainly not exhaustive but allow some considerations anyway. As in the introduction I distinguished between the architectural interest and the historical relevance of the research, I would like to conclude by making two different orders of observations. Firstly, beside the massive heterogeneous intervention of the second half of the 20th century, the *genius loci* of Italian Rhaetia is still visible today and has survived throughout time, to the point that certain medieval features continued to be present in the 18th century. The architectural heritage is coherent in itself and provides some general principles that can inspire contemporary projects. What these principles consist of depends on the sensitivity of each architect. Every new intervention must therefore be a product of active consciousness of the reality of the past. I want to underline that by this assumption I don't imply a forced continuity, as in the case of the historicist Villa Visconti Venosta and Palazzo Pretorio, but rather a justification of the architectural act in relation with the current built and natural environment. This research must not be seen as an encyclopedia of elements to draw from, but rather as a way of learning what is the historical heritage that we have to deal with, sometimes also in full contradiction.

Secondly, it is evident that future studies on the topic of grand houses should deepen the influence of rural and defensive typologies. The analysis of the territory of Italian Rhaetia should

be inserted within a pertinent research that goes beyond the political borders of nowadays: in this sense it is evident the embarrassment of Santino Langé in his treaty on the Lombard villas¹, where the Province of Sondrio is almost completely ignored, excepted the over-studied example of Palazzo Vertemate Franchi. On the other side of the Alps, the fragmentary studies on single villages (Peter Zumthor on Castasegna², Michael Alder on Soglio³ among the others) shall be unified within a holistic discourse that includes also Valtellina and Valchiavenna, as Diego Giovanoli as already tried to do and whose contribute has been essential to me. What I remarked the most in the sources I had the opportunity to read was the diffused sentimentalism regarding the oldest form of dwelling compared to the decadence of nowadays architecture. Personally I agree with Manfredo Tafuri, who affirms that "the task of history is to retrieve, as much as possible, the original functions and ideologies that define and delimit the role and the meaning of architecture"⁴. Not being an historian, my goal is way less ambitious: I hope that this book will contribute to make the architecture of Italian Rhaetia a little better known among architects and enthusiasts.

1 Santino Langé, *Ville delle Province di Como, Sondrio e Varese* (Milan: Edizioni SISAR, 1968).

2 Peter Zumthor, *Siedlungs-Inventarisierung in Graubünden* (Chur: Kantonale Denkmalpflege Graubünden, 1981).

3 Michael Alder, *Soglio: Siedlungen und Bauten* (MuttENZ : Ingenieurschule Beider Basel Abteilung Architektur, 1983).

4 Manfredo Tafuri, *Teorie e Storia dell'Architettura* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 1970), 263.

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