

Field Report

When Tradition Becomes Luxury: Swiss Agriculture, Architecture and Tourism in Symbiosis

ROSEMARY LATTER

This report discusses a wealthy society where traditional buildings are important both as a way of sustaining local cultural identity and attracting tourists. It examines how and for what motives such structures can be cherished in the context of the village of Les Diablerets in the Swiss Alps. While sustaining an original settlement and its customs, the village also plays host to a strong tourist industry in the form of a winter ski resort and a summer outdoor-pursuits location. The report discusses how the people of this mountain region reconcile the differing effects of agriculture and tourism on their culture and environment. The high status of, and affection for, local vernacular architecture in Les Diablerets may be compared with trends and attitudes in some developing countries, where traditional principles have been shed in favor of presenting a modern image to the global market.

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The genuine love the Swiss hold for their traditional buildings is clearly demonstrated by the large number of visitors to the Ballenberg Open Air Museum, where over thirteen groups of buildings are represented and cherished.¹ One of these groups provides a small cross-section of the houses and farm buildings of the Bernese Oberland. The mountain valleys of this area, no longer as remote as they once were, have always provided a refuge: once from marauding armies, and now from urban congestion.² It was in the early nineteenth century that tourists first began to affect the lives and buildings of

people living in adjacent mountain regions. How has this influx affected the agricultural identity of the indigenous population? And if they have prospered as a consequence of tourism, how have they sustained their traditions?

The defense by the Swiss of their national identity is exemplified by their reaction to proposed membership in the European Union. In a recent referendum, the Swiss population rejected membership in this body, largely because of fears the country would become dominated by it. For example, the Swiss expressed fears that local industries, such as cheesemaking, so influential in the rural economy and way of life, would become subject to European directives curtailing the output of small producers, who have always been free from such regulation.

Yet despite such fierce defense, the notion of Swiss identity has never been clearly defined. The modern Swiss state may even be seen as a paradigm of resistance to uniformity. It has existed for 150 years as a confederation of 23 cantons, each with its own special characteristics. Such a make-up implies a built-in aversion to centralization that has enabled the traditions and institutions of each region to remain distinct, and the ethnic, linguistic and religious origins of its citizens to thrive in an ethos of coexistence.

Throughout its existence, the Swiss confederation has also harbored a strong and well-integrated tourist industry. The relation of this tourist industry to traditional buildings, and the customs and mechanisms for their support — whether political, social or economic — can best be examined in the context of a representative area.

THE DEVIL'S PEAKS

The village of Les Diablerets lies at the head of a mountain valley in the French-speaking commune of Ormonts-Dessus, Canton de Vaud (FIG. 1). Above the village rises an imposing *massif*, or mountain range, which forms a natural

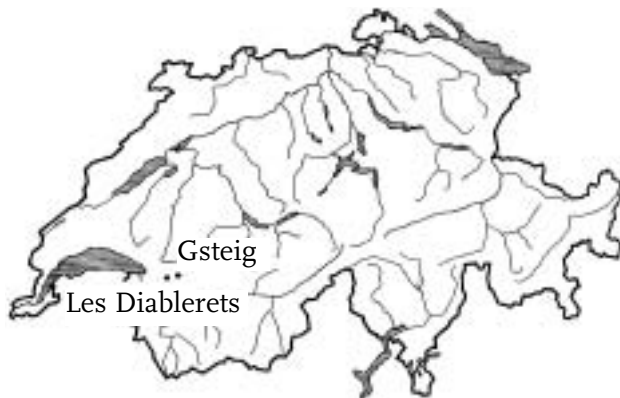


FIGURE 1. Map showing the location of the village of Les Diablerets. (Based on: M. Gschwend, *Bauernhäuser der Schweiz, Blauen, Schweizer Baudokumentation*, 1988.)

barrier with neighboring Gsteig in Saanenland (part of the German-speaking Canton of Berne just over the Col de Pillon pass). At a height of 1,200 meters, Les Diablerets is prone to heavy snowfalls in winter; and falls of 1.5 meters occur regularly in the village, which, together with the five surrounding glaciers, provides the setting for a successful ski resort. The valley is easily accessible by train and car, and in addition to skiing and other winter sports, it offers numerous opportunities for summer outdoor leisure, including walking, climbing, paragliding off the mountainsides, and mountain-biking.³ In order to explore the impact that such tourist activities have had on the local economy, environment, and traditional buildings, it is necessary to understand the situation prior to the arrival of such tourist activities.

Because of its difficult terrain and hostile climate, the valley of Les Diablerets was not permanently inhabited until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Before this time it served primarily as a safe haven from invaders — particularly from the Hungarians in the tenth century. Positioned at a strategic point in the Alps, the valley also changed hands several times, having both French and Germanic rulers. The most influential of these was the (Germanic) Bernese government of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Such Germanic influence in a French-speaking area can still be detected in the *patois* (dialect) of the local people, which contains many words of Germanic origin. A tradition of skilled craftsmen traveling over the mountain from Saanenland to build the majority of local chalets also persisted well into the twentieth century, and can still be detected by examining construction details and engraving techniques, and by tracing carpenters' marks.⁴

In the closed world of the valley there were few activities other than farming. The odd clock-maker and teacher supplemented a nineteenth-century workforce which was primarily dedicated to raising dairy cattle and other livestock on rich local grass to produce milk, butter and, particularly, cheese.⁵ The seasonal rhythm of this agricultural society was determined by the *remuage*, or transhumance, which might happen seven or eight times a year, as cows and goats were moved to find the best pastures. The spatial effects of ownership or grazing rights over small and disparate parcels of land at different altitudes necessitated that each family construct three or four buildings which they could inhabit at different times of year. At the beginning of this century, the sight of all these buildings prompted the first foreign tourists to assume, erroneously, that the valley had a large population.

With the opening of a road to the nearest main town, Aigle, in the 1830s, and across the mountain to Gsteig in 1885, the valley emerged from its isolation. An increase in the amount and variety of transport brought cheaper goods such as cereal crops from outside. And as such crops became uneconomic to grow locally, certain communally used buildings such as mills were abandoned. The first hotel, the "Le Grand," was built in Les Diablerets in 1856. A railway connection and electrification brought further

changes by 1914. Relatively rapid social change followed in the wake of exposure to industrial society, with many people leaving the valley to work in the factories of Aigle and Bex, or in the service sector of Montreux and Lausanne.

Tourism started to develop in earnest in the valley after the economic crash of the 1930s and World War II. Visitors came from foreign countries as well as other regions of Switzerland, since the characteristics of the valley met the need of an emerging urban middle class for an alternative to the urban life-style. This included a desire to encounter nature at its most rugged and escape pollution and ill health. The 1970s were pivotal years, as the people of the area turned away from agriculture towards tourism for their economic survival.⁶ A comparison of employment figures from 1968 to 1972 shows a 5 percent reduction in agricultural work, a 5 percent drop in construction jobs, and an 8 percent rise in tourist-associated occupations.

Today the village trebles its population of 1,370 during high season, and more than a quarter of the community is involved in tourism.⁷ The residents of Les Diablerets maintain considerable responsibility for local planning policy, and they have promoted measures enabling local people to rent out rooms, houses, or even barns to tourists. This provides a wide range of accommodation, which is good for visitors, while it prevents the exploitation of the settlement by outside investment companies.

The shift in the indigenous attitude toward tourism, and the acceptance that it has now become even more economically beneficial than agriculture, can be sensed in the changing perceptions toward the mountain range that looms over the settlement. Once the mountains were superstitiously spoken of as harboring demons, *les diables*; now, as the setting sun turns the peaks pink (and the cable car takes another cargo of wealthy skiers up to the glacier), they are lyrically praised for their beauty.

INTEGRATING FARMING

The shift from an exclusively agricultural economy to one based largely on tourism must be understood in relation to the sharp decline in farming in Ormont-Dessus in the last forty years. The small nature of typical farmsteads, averaging ten hectares in size,⁸ and their dispersal on often steeply sloping hillsides, has made agricultural mechanization difficult and production unsustainable. Today only 22 percent of the population is engaged in agriculture, producing only 15 percent of community revenue. Compounding this problem is the demographic trend of aging single men running farms, and the difficulty they have finding young women prepared to share such a hard life.

Nevertheless, farming is essential to the tourist industry, and farmers are keenly aware of the two levels on which they function. To maintain the picturesque landscape, the scenery needs tending, and summer cheese-making has been changed into something of a performance art in some moun-

tain locations. On a more practical level, mowing the fields for hay in late summer means that short grass will provide a firmer key for winter snows, helping to prevent avalanches.

To preserve the benefits of traditional agricultural practice, the government now subsidizes farmers and has developed a complex system of remuneration, depending on the height of a property above sea level, the number of livestock kept, and the degree of slope. A subsidy for milk production is also offered, whether sold or not, and some degree of mechanization also helps in terms of hay-making and cheese production. But farm families must often still supplement their incomes by taking part-time or seasonal work in the tourist industry. On farms too small to offer complete subsistence, women may rent out rooms or take part-time seasonal work in hotels and shops. Men may work on the ski lifts and *pistes* from 9 AM to 5 PM, an occupation that fits well with the early-morning milking routine and leaves time to see to the cows again before nightfall. These jobs, while not seen as prestigious, supplement family income and ensure that young people, in particular, do not have to leave the village to look for work in the towns and cities. In addition to these economic supports, local and regional policies also encourage long-term planning for forestry and the careful use of natural resources. Such policies are generally practical in their emphasis, allowing farmers to maintain a vested interest in properties which may have been handed down to them through several generations.⁹

Economic patterns such as those described above have led to the creation of buildings in Les Diablerets that are far more complex than idealized romantic visions would suggest. However, once an observer has some knowledge of the processes that happen inside them, they are easy to read from outside, offering excellent examples of form following function. With colored patterning, rich carving, religious and superstitious inscriptions, and almost fluorescent boxes of flowers, their decorations also give powerful insights into the personal relationships that people have with them (FIG. 2).

Usually, a village house has a basement of masonry, two upper floors of timber construction, and a slightly pitched saddle-back roof. The structures are quite substantial, and although they are sometimes split between two owners down the line of the ridge, they are more often in single-family ownership. The kitchen occupies the back of the building, with the slope of the hill allowing access from "ground level." Two living rooms at the front open onto the valley, with two more directly above. The vast timber chimney is used for smoking meat, and occupies the space above the kitchen. The facades are richly decorated with sculpted brackets, carpenters' marks, painted patterns, and inscriptions and motifs carved in relief. Most houses have a separate compartmented barn for grain storage, although on the outskirts of the village there are some larger houses with combined barns and byres for over-wintering livestock.

In addition to such a village house, a farmer may have several other buildings dispersed on the mountain slopes



FIGURE 2. The inscription “Jehan Tille fondateur de ce petit logis, 1671,” indicates the work of a carpenter building his own house and using it to display his virtuosity at carving.¹⁰ La Forclaz.

according to his pattern of grazing rights. These structures are occupied for several months of the year, by part or all of the family depending on the age of the children. Located as high as 1,600 meters, such summer “chalets” were traditionally used for making and storing cheese, and a few still retain this function (FIG. 3A, B). The word *chalet* comes from the root *cal*, meaning stone; and these buildings are either wholly or partially constructed of stone, defeating the notion of the timber chalet now simplistically thought of as the “national architecture of Switzerland.”¹¹

Combining lodging, byre and barn under the same roof, such buildings can house humans, cows, pigs and goats. The kitchen, with its large fireplace, is the principle room. It is here where cheese was traditionally made before being stored in adjacent cool rooms for transport down to the village for sale. In addition, summer chalets contain one or two rooms that open onto a gallery and can be accessed by a narrow stair on the valley side. These rooms provide simple but cozy accommodation and are heated by a stove fed from the kitchen.¹² The byre at the back of the building is located under the hay storage, easily reached from the steeply sloping mountainside.

CORRUPTION BY NOSTALGIA

Such traditional buildings are a potent symbol of a life without rapid change, particularly when the edifices themselves, or the customs associated with them, have survived several centuries. Their presence is a reminder of a time, sometimes sentimentally regarded, before the concept of globalization. According to Miles Danby, “the desire for modernity, however, is now concurrent with a growing nostalgia for the built environment of the past and an implicit belief that the new environment cannot be as beautiful and emotionally satisfying as the old.”¹³ However, the temptation to twist the reality of hard rural lives lived in cold, dark and lonely conditions into a marketing fable is tempting — especially in the context of a vernacular architecture that acts as a stage setting for imaginary characters.

Invocations of tradition have emerged as a theme in recent IASTE debates. The word “invocation” has as its dictionary definition “the calling upon God in prayer.” People do indeed resort to notions of ethnicity, nationalism and religion to bolster their identity when they feel overwhelmed by globalization. Thus, it is often emotion, as opposed to reason, that leads to a false or exaggerated view of the traditions and customs that sustain a society. Vernacular buildings,

being so rooted in their culture, evoke memories and inspire feelings; therefore, “evocation” might be an appropriate word to describe the effect they have on people’s emotions. Yet, rather than denigrate the importance of emotional attachment to place and buildings, it is important to recognize the real part that such attachments may play in national psyche and the projection of image.

An odd distortion of such an emotional identification is happening in the Graubunden region in eastern Switzerland. Here, in Maienfeld, “Heidi’s Mountain” is open to tourists (FIG. 4). According to the promotional material, a visitor can tour the “original house where Heidi lived,” and “take photos with Heidi sitting at her table or try the bed where she slept.”¹⁴ In fact, Heidi is a fictional character in a tale first published in 1880 about traditional rural life in the Swiss mountains. The story is now a children’s classic, along with the likes of *Anne of Green Gables* or *Treasure Island*.¹⁵

One visitor to “Heidi’s Mountain” was recently disappointed to learn that Heidi never existed, and that there was another “original” Heidi’s mountain further down the valley. Is this exploitation? If so, is it exploitation of Swiss heritage, foreign tourists, or vernacular architecture? The Swiss themselves have a healthy skepticism and robust attitude toward

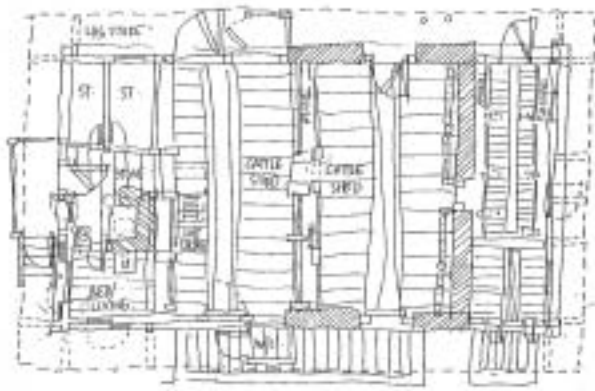


FIGURE 3A,B. A summer chalet on a high mountain pasture still used for sheltering cows and making and storing cheeses. Plan shows walls of stone construction as hatched. (Drawing by RG.)



FIGURE 4. Promotional leaflet for the Heidi “experience.”

such marketing ploys. When one Gstaad tourist office employee was asked for information about the Heidi “experience,” he said he hadn’t heard of it; but he laughed and commented to his colleagues that it sounded like a great idea, and that they should think of starting one in Saanenland.¹⁶

The romanticism of the hard life of the mountain child and its popularity with the public illustrates the affective power of a story not just on an autochthonous culture, but on the imaginations of people from completely different backgrounds, who through the luxury of foreign travel can choose to live a little part of it. The distinction between empathy for the lives and hardships of real people and the fantasy projections of fictional figures thus becomes shadowy.

In Les Diablerets visitors can purchase and take home miniature reminders of such a story and the emotional response associated with it. Local gift shops offer a choice of souvenirs ranging from clocks in the shape of houses with cuckoos in the attic windows; to barometers in the form of little houses out of which a man comes to predict rain and a woman to predict fine weather; to snow domes with scenes of mountains and alp



FIGURE 5. A new barn is built using frame construction, with the outer wall being “overclad” with logs. Gsteig.

horns; to ubiquitous imitation miniature cow bells. Traditional buildings feature prominently in the best-selling items and provide a major feature of the environment which attracts tourists.

The intention here is not to judge the validity and meaning of the Swiss attachment to their traditional buildings, but to examine the undercurrents present in the idealized physical and mental landscape of this rich country. Indeed, this emotional attachment shows how people operating successfully in a global economy still have a fundamental need to maintain the apparent certainties of the past for reassurance, and that buildings provide a strong physical manifestation of this need (FIG.5).

These sentiments, however, can be contrasted with the attitude toward vernacular buildings in the tourist developments of other parts of the world. Today such developments are hurried

along, and local people are not allowed the same time to reflect on the value of their local building traditions that the Swiss were afforded when tourism first arrived in their country. According to Danby: “The growing influence of professional designers, planners and engineers, parallel to rapid urbanization, has spread the prestige of increasingly expensive methods of building technology. This has usually been accompanied with a social devaluation of traditional methods of building technology.”¹⁷ The result is that many poorer countries today have shed notions of traditional society in favor of modern images and values.

Of course, it may be argued that the luxury of regarding the vernacular heritage as valuable is a social phenomenon of rich countries. But it is also true that, as they experience the modernization process, developing countries tend to go through a cycle of shedding symbols of their past, only to arrive later at the need to reinvent a heritage narrative that has little to do with the reality of the image they have struggled to create. When discussing the reasons for such transformations, Danby notes how “feelings of status and a desire for modernity may . . . be powerful influences.”¹⁸ Thus, the technological, climatic and cultural lessons embodied in traditional methods and forms are often disregarded because of certain negative connotations that attach to them in the minds of indigenous developers and politicians.

By contrast, the example of Les Diablerets and the valley of Ormont-Dessus shows how traditional agricultural economies can be sustained to a certain extent in alliance with the demands of global tourism. The application of appropriate traditional technology in the service of architectural heritage may even be marketed as a luxury holiday experience (FIG.6).



FIGURE 6. Building an extension to a chalet at the Col de Bretaye for rental during the tourist season. Vernacular building techniques are alive and in demand, in this case for the production of luxury chalets at a premium price. Constructor: Daniel Mermod.

REFERENCE NOTES

The author undertook this report while working on her doctoral thesis “The Significance of Language and Dialect for Vernacular Architecture” in the Postgraduate Research Department at Oxford Brookes University, England. As part of the research team at the Centre for Vernacular Architecture Studies, she was responsible for compiling the multilingual lexicon of vernacular architectural terms included in *The Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). The author acknowledges the support of the Postgraduate Research School at the School of Architecture, Oxford Brookes University, in the production of this report.

1. E. Huwiler, M. Gschwend, and R. Hunziker, *Ballenberg: Ländliche Bau- und Wohnkultur der Schweiz (Ballenberg: Rural Life and Buildings of Switzerland)* (Aarau: AT Verlag, 1994).
2. M. Gschwend, “Alpine,” in P. Oliver, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*, Vol.2.III.1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) gives an overview of the region.
3. A University of Berne study is examining the ecological conflict between nature and tourism. One problem that has already been identified is that wild mountain creatures such as marmots and chamois may view paragliders as predatory birds.
4. M.-C. Busset-Henchoz, “La Maison Paysanne a Ormont-Dessus,” thesis, Université de Lausanne, 1996.
5. A. Bailly, ed., *Ormont-Dessus: Les Diablerets, Vers-l’Eglise* (Imprimerie du “Journal de Geneve,” 1982).
6. *Ibid.*
7. Maison de Tourisme, Les Diablerets, approximate figures.
8. Today people still use the word *matin*, or morning, rather than hectare. It refers to the amount of grass that can be cut by scythe in a morning, approximately 2,250 sq.m.
9. The farm is usually inherited by the youngest son, enabling the parents to live in the main house for as long as possible.
10. H.-L. Guignard, *Ormont-Dessus* (Lutry, 1994)

- 11 D. Raymond, in J.-P. Vouga, ed., *Ormont-Dessus: Une Commune de Montagne devant son Avenir* (Aigle: Municipalité de la Commune d’Ormont-Dessus, 1993).
12. M. Gschwend, *Bauernhäuser der Schweiz (Farmhouses of Switzerland)* (Blauen: Schweizer Baudokumentation, 1988) shows the chimney form well in the chapter on Simmental.
13. M. Danby, “Culture and Technology,” *Third World Planning Review*, Vol.16 No.4 (1994).
14. *Welcome to the Heidi Village, Maienfeld, Switzerland* (promotional leaflet via the Swiss Tourist Authority).
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16. Gstaad Saanenland Tourismus. Discussion with tourist office worker.
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17. *Ibid.*

All illustrations are by the author, except where otherwise noted.

