21 The "obsolete structures" in the outstanding landscape of the UNESCO Dolomites World Heritage Site

Values, disvalues, and management practices

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Introduction

Since 2009 the Dolomites (Italian Eastern Alps) have been included in the UNESCO World Heritage List as a natural site according to criteria VIII, relating to geological processes and the consequent physical forms significant for Earth's history, and VII, relating to natural beauty (UNESCO, 2005). In 2011 an expert from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) – UNESCO's advisory body responsible for examining the applications and periodic checks for the natural properties of the World Heritage List – drew up an evaluation report. It addresses some specific requirements for maintaining landscape integrity to the Fondazione Dolomiti UNESCO, the institution in charge of managing the World Heritage Site (WHS). One of them was implementing "actions to remove obsolete infrastructure and equipment" (Worboys, 2011).

Between 2013 and 2018 the Fondazione Dolomiti UNESCO involved the Universities of Udine, Padua, and Iuav of Venice in various research activities on the subject of "obsolete structures" (which, for brevity, we will call "str.obs", based on the Italian *strutture obsolete*) for the purpose of cataloguing them in view of their removal. This chapter discusses some questions that arose alongside this research in which the authors were involved.[1]

The removal of str.obs is not a new concept for the Alps; in the early 2000s the NGO Mountains Wilderness had already launched a campaign for the removal of "installations obsolètes" in order to obtain a "requalification paysagère" in some protected areas of the French Alps (Mountain Wilderness, 2002).[2] Originally a voluntary activity, this operation was soon institutionalized in protected areas' plans and in local authorities' action plans in different parts of the Alps, drawing the attention of scholars. According to French geographer Laslaz (2013), the removal of str.obs is mostly a device for accentuating, by reaction, the value of the context. Laslaz subjects the operation to a close criticism summarized in three main points: the removal does not "save" nature but conforms it to certain aesthetic norms and certain ideological expectations which express an idealized, elitist, and urban conception of the Alps; removal

selectively denies the right to memory ("dénégation patrimoniale") and parti-
cularly affects some products of modernity; and, presented as an exemplary
action often carried out with heavy vehicles, removal is an operation of power
through which the volunteers and institutions involved build their own rights
over the "cleaned-up" areas.

While we largely agree with Laslaz's arguments, some issues need to be fur-
ther investigated. The exceptional nature of the UNESCO Dolomites site and
the relevance of the players involved in the strategy of removing str.obs in this
area allow us to focus on two fundamental questions: starting from a reflection
on the concept of obsolescence, on what other bases can the strategy of
removal be questioned? Can a greater awareness about obsolescence and
removal lead to improved management of natural heritage?

The issues at stake

The topic of str.obs and their removal calls into question the debate on some
more general issues. A first theme concerns considering nature as heritage: from
a general point of view, it is in fact a question of culture, linked to social,
anthropological and ethical arguments. Often in an unconscious way, this
implies a dichotomy between humans and nature as separate domains that leads
to considering the human presence as always being a threat to nature (Olwig
and Lowenthal, 2006; Papayannis and Howard, 2007). In the debate on
environmental aesthetics, the role of aesthetic judgment – typically of cultural
derivation – in formulating nature-conservation policies has been emphasized
(Brady and Prior, 2020): UNESCO's recognition of the Dolomites as a "nat-
ural" heritage for their aesthetic value (according to criterion VII) and the
resulting need to protect aesthetic integrity – even before natural integrity –
therefore appears to contain a strong cultural connotation.

A second reflection concerns the concept of obsolescence: in the debate on
material culture, the concept refers to common objects considered no longer
useful because, for example, they are out of fashion. This is expected when the
cultural context leads to paying increasing attention to the new and forgetting
everything old and useless, even if those things persist. However, obsolescence
is considered a field of possibilities in which creative practices can give new life
to what is no longer needed, thanks to the loss of its original function (Tis-
chleder and Wassermann, 2015). A partially similar approach can be found in
the architectural field (Abramson, 2016).

The debate on obsolescence is therefore linked to reflections on our rela-
tionship with the past, and particularly with the concept of aging. The attitude
is ambivalent, since in some cases we wish to forget, hide, remove, and replace
those parts of the past that we consider outdated (therefore considering them
obsolete); in other cases, we consider the past important for its intrinsic value,
within a process of heritagization (Lowenthal, 2015).

Due to this link between obsolescence and heritagization, the case of the str.
obs in the natural landscape of the UNESCO Dolomites can also be analysed

through the debate on cultural heritage. The Authorized Heritage Discourse (Smith, 2006) selects from the past the material and immaterial elements that should be considered as heritage. In so doing, it denies the same possibility of becoming heritage to other elements: this happens to the str.obs too, as Laslaz had already noted. On the one hand, what is considered "traditional" becomes heritage – given a difficult univocal definition of "traditional" (Stenseke, 2016), often referring to a generic "simpler, happier time" (Cameron, 2010: 211). On the other hand, the objects produced by modernity – perceived as problematic – are instead more easily "erased in favour of a nostalgic reference to a lost past" (Tilley, 2006). Only in some cases, such as industrial heritage valued for tourism purposes, what is functionally obsolete can acquire heritage dignity (Somoza-Medina and Monteserín-Abella, 2021). More often, what bears the signs of neglect and abandonment is difficult to recognize and accept as heritage (Garcia-Esparza, 2018). Both obsolescence and heritage reflect the material dimension of landscape change and the immaterial processes through which value or disvalue is attributed to the landscape; these processes themselves continuously change (Herring, 2019) and depend on the diversity of points of view (Swensen et al., 2013).

The gaze on the Dolomites landscape is strongly influenced by the history of their discovery by European travellers: since the 18th century, "the process through which such a scenery becomes a heritage landscape relates to a strategy to shield an orthodox way of seeing, treasured by temporary sojourners, from the potential harm provoked by permanent dwellers" (Bainbridge, 2018: 259). Both the very designation of this "heritage landscape" as a UNESCO WHS and the "set of conditional norms for the appreciation of a landscape, and a set of behavioural protocols for its conservation, management, and sustainability would depend on this 'privileged act of looking'" (ibid.). In this framework, the str.obs appear as inappropriate for the "picturesque" and the "sublime" landscape of the Dolomites.

The removal of the str.obs can therefore be considered a practice of landscape restoration and reinstatement of lost naturalness, a debated issue: "Rewilding as activist practice attempts to erase human history and involvement with the land and flora and fauna, yet nature and culture cannot be easily separated into distinct units" (Jorgensen, 2015: 487).

The "obsolete structures" in the UNESCO Dolomites

In setting up the work of cataloguing the str.obs, the research group considered it useful to classify them into systems according to the different activities from which the structures themselves originate: agro-pastoral, forestry, tourism, border/military, mining/industrial, energy and communication (Table 21.1.).

The research was based on cartographic analysis, field surveys, collecting signalization by public and private bodies, NGOs and web sources (web communities, newspapers, blogs). It made it possible to identify and map about 200 str.obs within the core area of the UNESCO site, in the buffer area or in close

Table 21.1. Potential Str.obs Systems. The systems the UNESCO Dolomites Foundation indicate as "critical" for the natural landscape of a WHS are highlighted

System	Structure
agro–pastoral	Alpine hut, cattle byre, barn, fountain, drinking trough, watering hole, shelter, storage, irrigation canal, terrace, fence, etc.
forestry	Sawmill, telpherage, forest service road, penstock, etc.
tourism	Alpine lodge, hotel, restaurant, café, path, hiking sign, advertising board, ski area, ski jump trampoline, ski lift, snow cannon, via ferrata, rock piton, steel rope, steel step, picnic area, road, parking, etc.
border/military	Boundary stone, trench warfare, military fort, barrack, military road, fortified line, military base, bunker, tunnel, etc.
mining/industrial	Mine, quarry, mill, furnace, industrial plant, shed, etc.
energy and communication	Hydropower station, reservoir, penstock, dam, intake, pylon, cable, antenna, repeater, roadman's house, rockfall barrier, avalanche protection, garage, warehouse, weir, etc.

proximity: remains of old power lines, stretches of abandoned roads, ruined bridges, neglected quarries, abandoned military structures, plants of abandoned ski lifts, and a rather large series of other disused artefacts linked to the tourism or infrastructural sectors. This list does not include the numerous str.obs already affected by some heritagization processes (WWI military and agro-pastoral artefacts) because the UNESCO Dolomites Foundation had promptly and explicitly asked to prioritize the str.obs systems considered "critical" for the landscape – infrastructural, mining/industrial and tourist systems – from which a more probable disturbance is expected: the structures built after 1950. This moment actually corresponds in the common sense to a sort of temporal watershed between the "traditional" cultural landscape and the "modern" anthropic transformations that create negative impacts and "disturbances". These are certainly reasonable criteria in view of removing disturbances, as recommended by IUCN: most of the str.obs identified during the research are small, abandoned, temporary objects (for example, disused construction site shacks), very visible and easily accessible. Their removal is certainly the most desirable solution. However, in more complex cases removal can be questioned. In the followings, we present some examples of str.obs identified in the research, even in the light of what happened in the last few years, that allow us to critically discuss the strategy of removal.

Abandoned hotel in Passo Rolle (TN). This is a mountain pass hotel dating back to the early 20th century that was enlarged and heavily transformed before being left in disuse. The structure was decrepit at the time of the research. Opinions online have a strong negative connotation and identify the hotel as a significant component of the degradation of the pass itself. Patrimonio del Trentino S.p.A (the company that manages the properties of the Autonomous

Province of Trento, owner of the land of Passo Rolle) had acquired the hotel "abandoned, dilapidated and a real problem for the safety of citizens" to demolish it …. The abatement remedies a state of degradation that is unacceptable for an area of this environmental quality".[3] The hotel was demolished at the end of 2017. The press reported unanimous satisfaction, underlining that demolishing the "decrepit wreck that had marred the place for years" has been "a benefit for everyone".[4] The media framed it as the beginning of a new life and a sign of the willingness to revive Passo Rolle for tourism.

Ruins of the Pineland tourist complex, Forni di Sopra (UD). These are the remains of an unfinished building designed in the early 1960s by the Italian architect Marcello D'Olivo; it "was supposed to be a tourist residence hotel commissioned by a London company in 1964, which was abruptly interrupted due to the bankruptcy of the company".[5] Only the reinforced concrete skeleton of the complex's most imposing structure (an arched building about 100 metres long) remains. The unfinished work was then abandoned, and it is now almost completely hidden by vegetation, despite being close to a main road. The structure, which the NGO Mountain Wilderness in 2011 included in a report about obsolete structures in Friuli, is not a common str.obs, but an "artistic" ruin, one of the few examples of Marcello D'Olivo's organic architecture in Italy, thus valuable for the history of architecture.

Plinths of old chair lifts and ski lifts on the Marmolada Mountain (TN). From the very beginning of tourism development in the Marmolada area, several ski lifts have been built, demolished, and re-built to reach the glacier, which today is in rapid retreat due to global warming. Some of the lift foundations (concrete pillars) remain, such as those distributed along a straight line that, from the Fedaia Pass (2,057 m asl), reaches an altitude of 2,650 m near the Pian dei Fiacconi refuge. Some are more disturbing due to their size and the presence of exposed iron, pipes, and concrete retaining walls; others have a lower visual impact, as they blend in with the surrounding rock; and some of them have found a new use as hiking trail markers. In the same area (outside but very close to the WHS perimeter) there is a project to replace the lift disused in 2019 with a new bigger cable car. During 2020, the local environmentalist associations asked that any new ski lifts were authorized after a complete dismantling of the remaining disused lifts. On this occasion, 4,500 signatures were collected to ask that "the useless and disfiguring memory of the ancient structures be erased" on the Marmolada; the public administration listened to this petition.

The roadman's houses. During the research, some str.obs belonging to serial systems were also highlighted, such as the roadman's houses once occupied by the families of the workers in charge of maintaining the state roads and their equipment. The roadman's houses have not been used for some time due to the cessation of their original function and are often in a poor state of conservation. Although these are objects dating back prior to 1950, they have been included in our survey due to their significant dimensions, position close to the core area, great visibility and – a crucial topic that we will return to later – full

Figure 21.1. Str.obs in the Dolomites. One of the plinths remaining from old chair lifts
           on the Marmolada slopes
Source: Photo by Chiara Quaglia, 2016

Figure 21.2. Str.obs in the Dolomites. One of the plinths remaining from old chair lifts
           on the Marmolada slopes, now reused as trail sign
Source: Photo by Chiara Quaglia, 2016

potential for new uses. During the research, eight houses were mapped, some
of which were reduced almost to ruins.

Alongside these examples, we also report the interesting case of *the plinths of the
ski lift in Danta di Cadore (BL)*, slightly outside the WHS. From 2008–2009, the
concrete plinths of the old ski lift's pylons were removed as part of a Life project[6]
with the purpose of environmental restoration and tourist enhancement (adding

signs, equipped paths, etc.). The project documents are very explicit: "These are obviously artefacts that are not suited to the natural and landscape characteristics of the place and which can negatively affect the overall image of the site"; "The impact is exclusively of landscape type, but significant because the peat bog, beyond the ecological and naturalistic peculiarities of wetlands, is located in an area of high aesthetic value … and with appreciable wilderness characteristics"; "Even the interventions with a prevalent aesthetic-landscape orientation, such as the elimination of cementitious artefacts, are part of the philosophy of offering a fruition that contributes to recovering the sense of naturalness, of coexistence with the nature that surrounds us to avoid new violence". However, the unique disvalue attributed in official documents is questioned on a blog of cable car enthusiasts,[7] where a user explicitly expresses regret for the removal of the plinths, the last trace of a plant whose story he is trying to reconstruct.

Removing obsolete structures: a critical discussion

These examples suggest that the very concept of obsolescence, and therefore the definition of str.ob, deserves further study. According to MW (2002) the str.obs are abandoned objects built with "exogenous" materials and which "disfigure" the mountain landscape. Laslaz (2013) questions the uncertainty of these criteria, coming to the conclusion that the definition of str.ob does not precede but follows the choice of removal. Basically, a str.ob would be an "abandoned artifact, identified and inventoried, for which a dismantling operation is envisaged by associations, organizations or public bodies, upon agreement with the owners" (ibid.: 355). As Laslaz notes, removal expresses the aspirations of those who support it: an aesthetic preference; a lesson in respect for nature; the reparation of damage; a reminder of the responsibility of decision makers and owners; a self-legitimation for the promoters of removal (ibid.). It emerges from the Dolomites case that the return to the "natural" state would also be a deterrent for subsequent anthropogenic interventions, which is more difficult to accept in an "intact" place than in a man-made place. In short, it is an attempt at *damnatio memoriae*.

Certainly, the removal, as in the case of the hotel in Passo Rolle, can have a cathartic effect and bear a palingenetic action, which allows restarting with a new project. However, localized str.obs removal becomes problematic if uncritically applied as a generalized strategy for managing the UNESCO WHS. Examining the 2011 mission report, the IUCN experts' approach emerges between the lines: human activities represent a form of exploitation and a disturbance to conserving the outstanding beauty of the core area of the Dolomites' natural heritage, which ideally should remain intact. Thus, protecting the WHS must translate into visible and measurable actions to be credible. The ultimate aim – as absurd as it may sound – would be to eliminate all human activities, cancel the disturbance or stop exploitation. In the Dolomites, however, there are plenty of signs of human activities especially connected to tourism, even at high altitudes. It would not be politically credible to pretend

to eliminate them unless we deeply question the current development model. Therefore, the strategy focuses on the str.obs, a small subset of signs that correspond to activities that are no longer ongoing. Removing the str.obs is politically acceptable because it only asks to remove "dust", to throw away things that (at least apparently) are no longer needed. As it is unviable to eliminate the active functions, it is proposed to remove the signs of inactive functions represented by the str.obs. Yet, this reveals a trap: the visual impact of the disused ski lift plinths on the Marmolada, for example – however much disturbance it may cause – disappears in the presence of the long ski slope that significantly marks the landscape and whose existence no one even dreams of questioning.

A critical reading of the requests and proposals put forward by the actors involved allows us to identify some preconceived positions that can lead to

Table 21.2. Some preconceived positions and their related narratives inherent in the strategy of removing str.obs, and the resulting paradoxes

Preconceived positions	Related narratives	Resulting paradoxes
1. Eco-aesthetics	Integrity is nature without humans; human activity is interpreted as exploitation. Removing the str.obs is an "eco-aesthetic" cleaning (narrative of renaturalization).	To justify removing the str.obs, which are considered to disturb the *natural* heritage, *cultural* arguments are used (explicitly mentioning, for example, aesthetic or visual integrity).
2. Ethical compensation	Removing the str.obs means not only cleaning the Dolomites, but also compensating them for the damage suffered before. Removal is a kind of ethical compensation (Laslaz, 2013) (narrative of restitution).	The symbolic value of removal may exceed its concrete effect. By also bearing the costs of removal, the local community actually risks "paying" twice.
3. Un–do	Removal seems to have a sort of "magic power" to go back in time, returning to a state of "uncontaminated" nature in the Dolomites (narrative of restoration).	Removal may be irrational if its impact is greater than the benefit. Removal may be economically wasteful when the outdated structure is potentially reusable.
4. One perception	It is assumed that everyone shares the same negative perception of the str.obs (narrative of disvalue).	Some people may perceive removal as loss. There is a conflict in the attribution of value between experts/populations, insiders/outsiders and interest groups.
5. No heritage	Str.obs are painted as "ugly" and "dirty": as such, they lose the right to become heritage (Laslaz, 2013), or the right to curated decay (DeSilvey, 2017) (narrative of degradation).	Contemporary artefacts are denied any possible heritage value. The process of heritagization of the context prevents any form of heritagization of the object.

paradoxical situations. We have summarized them in Table. 21.2. with the intentionally provocative purpose of building greater awareness of the relationship between attributions of value (and disvalue) and consequent actions, also with a view to better and more consistent management of the WHS. These preconceived positions, which we have named *eco-aesthetics, ethical compensation, un-do, one perception*, and *no heritage*, are supported by certain specific narratives (renaturalization, restitution, restoration, disvalue, and degradation) and justify a priori removing the str.obs without a real convenience assessment or considering any alternative attributions of value.

Concluding remarks

The processes of attribution of value/disvalue that drive the protection policies and the management of landscape change are particularly interesting in the case of UNESCO sites, where the concept of "outstanding universal value" faces the practices and processes of use/disuse. In the Dolomites WHS this issue is amplified by the contrast between the exceptional natural elements and the signs of human activity, mostly interpreted as detractors. Among these detractors, the str.obs represent a set that is both obvious and problematic, as shown by the research experience described above, which questions the institutionalized strategy of their removal.

In many cases removing the str.obs is a desirable solution; it can have a cathartic value in the framework of the consumer society, represent an exemplary reminder of the responsibility of those who built them in the past (according to the "polluter pays" principle), and produce a deterrent effect with respect to future intervention projects. A greater awareness of the processes of attribution of value and disvalue, however, can help to avoid falling into the paradoxes discussed above and encourage evaluating the effective convenience (including the environmental one) of removal, even with respect to a possible "curated decay" (DeSilvey, 2017) and avoiding the trap of an Authorized *Anti*-heritage Discourse.

The removal, in turn, can involve some risks: the loss of information, energy and work potentially incorporated in the str.obs; costs disproportionate to the value of the result; the risk of distracting attention from the much more significant impacts caused by functioning structures (sometimes close to the str.obs) that it would not be politically admissible to request removing; and finally, the risk of losing opportunities for reuse or recycling that could emerge in the future.

Explaining preconceived positions makes it possible to consider the str.obs' presence not only as a factor of degradation, but as an opportunity in protected areas and UNESCO sites, inviting a more coherent and effective strategic approach to managing exceptional landscapes. Given the plurality of functions/dysfunctions and values/disvalues that can be associated with the str.obs, reflecting on the destiny of the single structure and the definition of the actions to be taken represents a valid opportunity for citizens to participate in constructing a shared project for the Dolomites area.

The research group insisted on the opportunity given by an investigation based not on the choice of a priori removal, instead suggesting to enlarge the observation field to all those abandoned or underused artefacts whose recovery could represent an opportunity for managing the UNESCO Dolomites site. A recent sign in this direction is encouraging: in 2020 a roadman's house in Cortina d'Ampezzo found a new function as an information centre for the Fondazione Dolomiti UNESCO, and is also in view of the Winter Olympics to be held in the area in 2026.

A critical reflection on the str.obs should finally be an occasion for forward-looking considerations on anthropic activity in sensitive areas that include the consequences that global warming could entail, even in a short time, for certain types of uses and infrastructures. In particular, the infrastructures for winter sports that are being built lately in the Dolomites as a function of global sporting events could be destined to rapidly transform into str.obs due to the rapid climatic changes of the context in which they are inserted.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 This chapter results from the common work of the authors. Viviana Ferrario wrote section 1 and 4, Benedetta Castiglioni wrote section 2 and they wrote sections 3 and 5 together.
2 The Mountain Wilderness "Obsolete Facilities" campaign won the UIAA Mountain Protection Award in 2016 and continues to this day: www.theuiaa.org/uiaa/mountain-wilderness-marks-two-decades-of-removing-obsolete-facilities-from-mountain-areas/ (Retrieved on 14 November 2020).
3 *Il Trentino. Quotidiano online della Provincia Autonoma di Trento*, Press office, press release 31992017, November 28: www.ufficiostampa.provincia.tn.it/Comunicati/Passo-Rolle-consegnati-i-lavori-per-la-demolizione-dell-albergo (Retrieved on 15 November 2020).
4 www.ladige.it/territori/valsugana-primiero/2017/12/19/addio-allecomostro-che-deturpava-passo-rolle (Retrieved on 15 November 2020).
5 *Il Piccolo*, 16 December 2015: https://ricerca.gelocal.it/ilpiccolo/archivio/ilpiccolo/2015/12/16/nazionale-riscopriamo-l-incompleta-pineland-dell-architetto-d-olivo-39.html (Retrieved on 30 April 2021).
6 2006–2007 LIFE project "Danta2004" (Life04 NAT/IT/000177) – Technical report. The project website (http://torbieredanta.info) has been discontinued, but quoted documents can be downloaded at the Internet Archive (https://archive.org).
7 www.funiforum.org/funiforum/node/3623 (Retrieved on 5 October 2021).

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