

# Ramshackle farmhouses, useless old stables, or irreplaceable cultural heritage? Local inhabitants' perspectives on future uses of the Walser built heritage



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## ABSTRACT

Social and economic developments in rural regions call for a discussion of strategies of dealing with redundant traditional buildings. Using a social science approach, our study examines how the local population in two rural regions perceives the built heritage and which factors are underlying these perceptions. People's attitudes towards maintaining the cultural heritage vary considerably and are partly influenced by the socio-cultural and economic context of the region. The present article discusses some of the core regional socio-cultural influences on attitudes towards the rural built heritage. Following from qualitative interviews, the article concludes that the scale of perception of the built heritage is related to the "liveliness" of the local culture: The more original and distinctive the local culture is, and the more the local economy is still based on agriculture, the wider the scale of perception of the traditional cultural landscape and built heritage. In a region with local traditions that are alive and followed in everyday life, and a local economy that is mainly based on agriculture, the entire settlement structure is perceived as cultural heritage. In such areas, alternative uses should be found for redundant buildings. In contrast, in regions where the culture is less visible and alive nowadays and where the local economy has changed, people tend to perceive single buildings as representing their cultural heritage, and they often wish to preserve and conserve such remaining houses, barns and stables. In the study, we show that from a social science point of view, there is no universal perception of the maintenance of built cultural heritage. Rather, we see different views and opinions that are important to consider when it comes to developing heritage protection strategies together with public authorities.

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## 1. Introduction

In the debate of cultural heritage management, the protection of built heritage plays an important role. Built heritage does not only include cultural monuments of international significance such as those included in the UNESCO World Heritage list, but also historical buildings and settings of minor importance, but characteristic of local culture. According to the Venice Charter (1964, Art. 1), these buildings are also considered historic monuments and therefore, from the point of view of architects and other specialists, they also deserve protection. This article will center on the local inhabitants' point of view concerning this particular form of heritage – an

approach that has recently been discussed under the term "community heritage" (Mydland and Grahn, 2012). We want to find out how local inhabitants think about the built cultural heritage of their local culture and more particularly, how they think about possibilities for future uses of these historical remnants. By comparing local's attitudes in two rural Alpine settings with a shared cultural background but a strongly differing socio-economic context, we try to achieve a more comprehensive understanding on this issue. In two comparative case studies, we discuss the challenges of dealing with built heritage in rural regions, touching the topics of modernization, tourism, (local) identity, cultural minorities and, more general, the management of built heritage sites.

The main focus of interest were agricultural buildings, given that these are the dominant forms of built cultural heritage in rural regions and a characteristic element of typical rural landscapes in most European regions (Buchecker, 2010). In many rural regions, in particular in the Alps, traditional agricultural buildings

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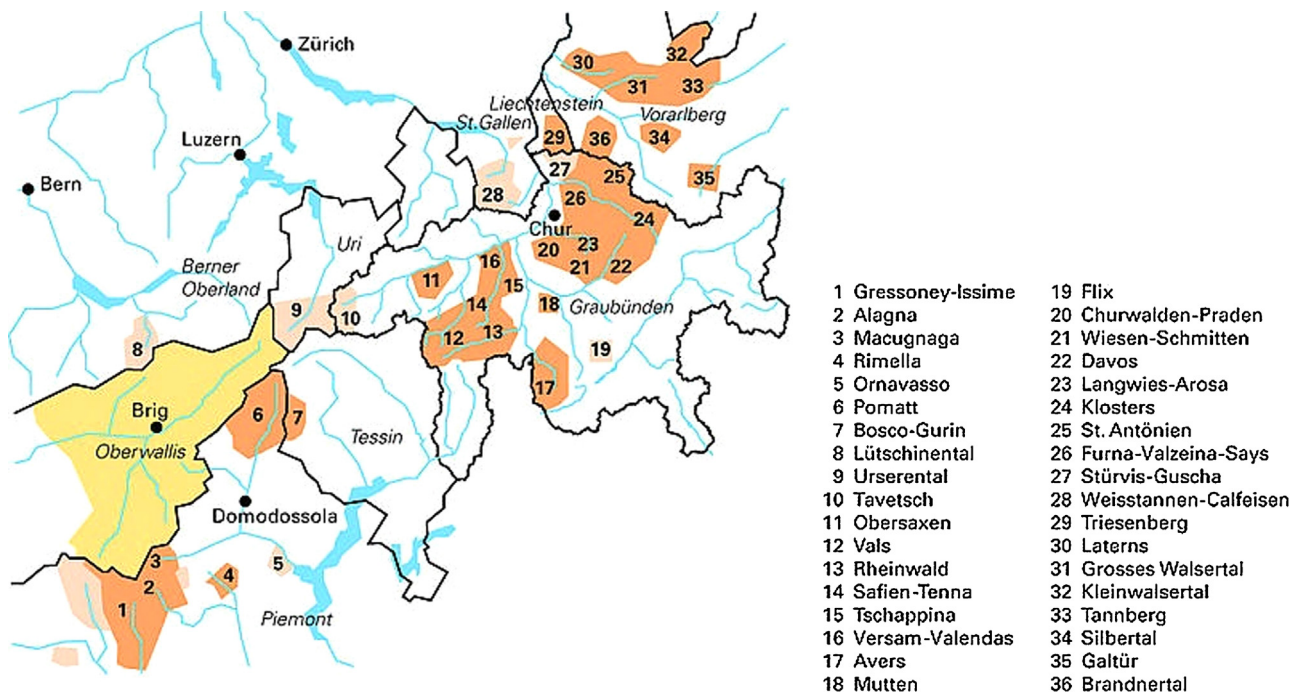


Fig. 1. Areas of origin Walser regions in Switzerland, Italy, Liechtenstein and Austria. (Figure by International Walser Association).

have become redundant in the last decades due to the (retarded) economic development (modernization of agriculture, increase of tourism industry) and the social changes such as emigration or commuting (Kianicka et al., 2010; Hunziker et al., 2008). Therefore the question is whether to conserve, reuse or let the old buildings fall down. A considerable proportion of traditional agricultural buildings have already been reused as holiday homes (in particular agricultural buildings with residential functions in attractive locations), others have completely disappeared, in particular peripheral economic buildings such as stalls or barns.

Previous studies have shown that for the local inhabitants, agricultural buildings representing the traditional livelihood are part of their cultural identity and therefore important for maintaining social coherence (Niederer, 1996). At the same time, maintaining buildings without economic benefit is costly and can also hinder options of economic development. These developments raise questions about how to deal best with redundant buildings to find an optimal balance between local identity and economic development. In tourism regions, economic development is also dependent on the preservation of cultural heritage (Buchecker et al., 2007). Frequently, there are latent conflicts between the stakeholders on this issue that only come to light when decisions concerning buildings used in the traditional culture have been taken. Put briefly, a better understanding of local inhabitants' attitudes towards how to deal with their cultural heritage would allow to anticipate these conflicts, to address them in local planning and hence, to achieve a more sustainable development (Buchecker, 2010).

There are many different approaches and definitions of heritage of which we picked out the two that are central for this study: First, UNESCO defines cultural heritage as our legacy from the past, that we live with today, and that we pass on to future generations. It is the irreplaceable result of life and inspiration, which we should seek to identify, protect and preserve (UNESCO, 2012). Second, Following Graham and Howard (2008), we consider cultural heritage not only as objects or traditions, but also as a process whereby artefacts from the past, for example buildings or cultural landscapes, become cultural, political and economic resources in the present. This definition puts the focus on the present, since

people's attitudes towards cultural heritage are formed today. The past is thereby the base and provides the raw material of heritage. The meaning of this heritage which depends on current social needs is much more important in this article. People's relevant opinions, attitudes and needs represent the value of heritage and help us to understand the processes shaping the cultural identity of a region (Graham and Howard, 2008; Graham et al., 2000).

There is no generally accepted definition of cultural identity in literature. Sometimes it is defined as a feeling of affiliation of an individual person or a social group to a society, to a cultural milieu or to a subculture (Sussman, 2000). It can thus be considered a collective identity, which makes the individual see "his or her relation to a cultural community as a unique link that confers a special sense of personal value, importance and collective meaning" (Premdas, 2011). Shared values about religion, language, family and gender etc. stimulate the identity of the daily lived culture. At the same time, shared values and beliefs are often used to distinguish one community from another. Recent approaches assume that cultural identities are constructed by cultural resources and that they are used to legitimate individuals' personal strategies. Hall and Du Gay (1996) emphasize that cultural identities are not orientated to individuals' shared ancestral history, but rather that the process of becoming a culture is essential, in other words how the cultures are formed through the language and other elements (such as built structures) over a period of time. In the same sense, Palmaru (2014) defines culture as a pattern of meanings that emerges by interaction, so that culture as well as its achievements should not be considered only as a preserving phenomenon but rather as generative mechanism to optimally cope with the environment.

The question of the relationship between identity building and cultural heritage has long been neglected in research, even though cultural heritage is seen as an identity-building element (Stephens and Tiwari, 2015). For McLean (2006), cultural heritage, whether material or intangible, represents the identity of the local people in a region. Grazuleviciute-Vileniske (2008) or Worthing and Bond (2008) emphasize the importance of the built heritage for a sustainable landscape development. Heritage is thereby understood as a source for the maintenance of local identity, cultural diversity and

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