

REFLECTION

I started Explore Lab with a passion for research, with the aim of learning more about my roots and the region I grew up in in France. With the idea of looking specifically at the social and architectural relationships in the high altitude areas. In the first steps of my research, I discovered the forgotten heritage of the Alpine fortifications of the Second World War, along the borders of Italy with France, Switzerland, Austria. Questioned by the lack of representation and dialogue on the subject within local society, I set out to understand the mechanisms by which these structures were abandoned, both socially and architecturally.

I structured my research and design methodology around my fascination with the social dimensions of architecture and its perception. My approach was to gather narratives related to Alpine bunkers primarily through interviews, supplemented by extensive exploration of enthusiast blogs, maps, literature, and satellite imagery. Although a large proportion of the interviews were of little use given the general lack of awareness on the subject this only fuelled my determination to shed light on this neglected heritage.

Initially, I was apprehensive about the subject of military architecture. However, by concentrating on observing and understanding the structures themselves rather than their wartime context, I developed a sensitive approach that was the foundation for my design. Organising my study around four thematic pillars - encounter, materiality, shelter and memory - I focused on the aspects that resonated with me during my field visits and deepened my understanding through theoretical research, building up a base of interest that has subsequently fed strongly into my design.

My research journey led me to develop an interest in "bunker-ology," exploring concepts related to abandonment, decay, and their societal implications. Drawing from my own experiences with bunkers and a field trip in November 2023, my exploration began with the Les Rochilles structure. Located in a particularly isolated valley popular with hikers in all seasons and rich in frontier history still visible today. This particular location suggested the possibility of a project to enhance the heritage of Alpine fortifications.

The thrill of discovery and the adrenalin of walking in such a sumptuous place, rich in history, is still engraved in my memory, which is why I decided to develop my project around this particular structure.

However, as I delved deeper into the project, I struggled with personal contradictions. While deeply passionate about the mountains, I also recognised the environmental challenges posed by human activity, over-tourism, and climate change. My knowledge of the current condition of this environment led me to reject the idea of building there. Designing an architectural programme for the 'Seuil des Rochilles' was therefore a personal challenge. But I believe I managed to develop a program that is well-suited for this location, honouring the site's anthropological significance while envisioning resilient, low-impact architecture. Through a prefabricated structure utilising local materials and promoting habitat creation for the surrounding ecosystem, I sought to minimise environmental disruption.

The intervention is justified by the project's transformative nature, turning the site into a destination that fosters communal interaction within the Libraries, and individual reflection through waypoint structures along the path. By incorporating active spaces like the kitchen and strategic pathways with sculptural stops like the observation booths, Camera Obscura and water collector, the project encourages engagement with the environment and promotes a deeper understanding of its significance. This is achieved by connecting the different elements of the site through visual interaction (selected views, contrasting materialities) and sensitive experience of the spaces (emphasised noises, darkness, labyrinthine circulations). This approach adds value by revitalising the site, making it accessible on both intellectual and experiential levels. The carefully

designed elements unlock the memories and historical context of the bunker, enriching visitors' perceptions and creating a meaningful connection to the space. Additionally, by considering the fragile ecosystem surrounding these structures, the project aims to spark dialogue on the intersection of built heritage and ecological context, further enhancing its relevance and impact.

The methodology I conducted and the point of interests I decided to emphasize in the research and design process not only seeks to re-appropriate overlooked structures into the cultural dialogue but also addresses the pressing need to protect fragile ecosystems where these structures reside. The emphasis on understanding narratives, physical integrity, and social engagement aligns with the broader theme of conservation and transformation in the built environment, fostering nuanced and sustainable reinterpretations of our cultural heritage. By approaching mountain architecture as impermanent yet acknowledging its footprint, through the design of permanent walls in natural stone directly extracted from the site, the project leaves a lasting imprint of the built environment while respecting the fragility of the ecosystem. Combined with a prefabricated wooden structure and glass curtain walls, rendering the walls 'temporarily habitable', the project engages with questions of afterlife in architecture, a problem often overlooked in construction - "what happens when the building expires?" - to express itself in dialogue with the crumbling bunker, a toxic space slowly reclaimed by nature.

Looking ahead, the final phase of my graduation period will be dedicated to further refining and clarifying the intricate relationships between the bunker, the project, and its environment. Ultimately, my aim is to materialise the research and design as a whole through drawing and photography, translating academic insights into practical applications that enrich both our cultural heritage and our built environment.