

27 January 2026

Rural Reactivation Through Architecture along Ancient Trails

Proposal for an International Winter School and Joint Research Initiative between Politecnico di Torino and Tsinghua University. Architectural Strategies for Rural Reactivation along the Via Francigena (Italy)

Coordinator: Roberto Dini, Associate Professor DAD, Director Research center IAM (Istituto Architettura Montana)

Co-coordinator : Francesca Governa, Full Professor DIST, China Room

Co-coordinator: Lidia Preti, PhD, Research Assistant DAD, China Room



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Project Framework

The proposed Winter School, *Rural Reactivation Through Architecture along Ancient Trails*, is conceived as a research and design-based project investigating a Sino–Italian approach to revitalization along ancient trails. The proposed Winter School will focus on the Via Francigena ancient trail, in the section between Switzerland and Italy, with the aim of exploring how architectural inquiry and design experimentation can contribute to the reactivation of rural landscapes, heritage, and communities. The central focus of the Winter School will be the Via Francigena stretch between Saint-Oyen and the Great St Bernard Pass at the Swiss–Italian border. Rooted in local territorial contexts, the research adopts fieldwork as a central methodological tool, emphasizing direct engagement with sites, communities, and spatial dynamics. In this context, the inscription of the Via Appia on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2024 signals a renewed international interest in ancient trail systems, highlighting their cultural, territorial, and socio-economic relevance and situating this research and the proposed Winter School firmly within the contemporary international discourse.

The proposed Winter School is part of a broader research initiative on ancient trails, carried out in collaboration with international scholars from Tsinghua University, which explores the potential of historic trail systems to function as contemporary templates for both environmental restoration and economic development in rural regions. The overall research agenda for 2025–2026 focuses on two historical routes: the Southern Silk Road in Yunnan and the Via Francigena between Switzerland and Italy. In this context, ancient trail networks are positioned as laboratories for critical reflection on rural territories, raising questions about how architecture can generate new forms of liveability and meaningful territorial engagement beyond urban areas.

Within this shared framework, the initiative addresses broader research questions: *What is needed beyond cities? How can architectural interventions shape the future of rural areas and foster new forms of liveability outside urban contexts?*

Institutional Context and Scientific Relevance

The project is embedded within the established collaboration between the School of Architecture at Tsinghua University and the Department of Architecture and Design at Politecnico di Torino, integrating complementary expertise and research traditions focused on rural areas, historical routes, and context-responsive spatial strategies. Aligned with the objectives of the Politecnico di Torino Strategic Plan 2024–2030, the initiative reflects the University’s commitment to internationalisation and public engagement, understood as key levers for generating social and territorial impact. The project contributes to the ongoing scientific debate on rural regeneration processes and development perspectives beyond urban contexts, placing architecture at the core of discussions on new forms of liveability and the sustainable enhancement of marginal territories.

Project Structure and Scientific Coordination, Politecnico di Torino

- Roberto Dini, Associate Professor DAD, IAM
- Francesca Governa, Full Professor DIST, China Room
- Lidia Preti, PhD, Research Assistant DAD, China Room

List of International Faculty

The international faculty proposed for the Winter School, comprises professors from different departments, thereby strengthening the interdisciplinary and international character of the proposal in accordance with the objectives of the call. Professors are affiliated with both **Departments of Architecture** and **Departments of Urban Planning**, mirroring the interdisciplinary structure of the Italian partnership between **DAD and DIST at Politecnico di Torino**.

- Associate Professor Martijn de Geus, School of Architecture, Department of Architecture, Tsinghua University - *proposed as a short-term visiting Professor for the DAD department (one week)*
- Shen Yi, Phd Candidate, School of Architecture, Department of Architecture, Tsinghua University
- Associate Professor Zhou Zhengxu, School of Architecture, Department of Urban Planning, Tsinghua University, China

Detailed Programme April 2026

Selected sites to visit

1. **Saint-Oyen.** A site focused on traditional techniques, with potential for expansion through product sales and workshop activities.
2. **Gignod.** An agricultural hub active throughout the year, characterized by dairy production, a local brewery, and goat cheese processing facilities.
3. **La Cantine.** A hospitality structure providing accommodation and related services, active mainly during the summer season.
4. **Praz D'Arc.** A site dedicated to the sale of local and typical products, with activity concentrated in the warmer months.
5. **Saint-Rhémy North Gate.** A small cluster of currently abandoned buildings offers strong potential for reactivation, benefiting from consistent accessibility throughout all seasons.

	<i>morning</i>	<i>lunch</i>	<i>afternoon</i>	<i>dinner</i>	<i>night</i>
Day 0	Arrival in Torino of the group			Dinner in Turin	Night in Turin,
Day 1	10:00 – 12:00 Valentino Castle guided tour + New architecture campus construction site visit	13:00-14:30 Lunch	17:25 Porta Nuova Station train to Aosta (self-arranged). Arrival in Aosta 19:42 Accommodation self-arranged	Dinner in Aosta	Accommodation in Aosta
Day 2	8:30-10:30 Meeting and guided visit of the city of Aosta 10:30 / 13:00 Departure by bus from Aosta (to be confirmed): meeting with local administrations	13:00-14:00 Picnic bag	14:00 – 18:00 Meetings with local stakeholders: – Dairy production – Goat farm and goat cheese production – Ham production facility	Dinner	Accommodation in Saint-Rhémy Hostel
Day 3	8:30 – 10:00 Departure to visit ham production Saint-Rhémy-en-Bosses 10:00-11:00 transfer to Switzerland side of the pass 11:30 start of the hiking towards San Bernardo pass. Accompanied by Local Alpine Guide	13:00-14:00 Picnic bag	16:00 Arrival to Gran San Bernardo Hospice 17:00-19:00 Visit to the area at the peak	20:00 Dinner provided at Gran San Bernardo Hospice	Accommodation in Gran San Bernardo Hospice

Day 4	8:30 – 13:00 Descent from the Italian side - visit of La Cantine site - visit of Praz D’Arc - Saint Rhémy north gate site Accompanied by Local Alpine Guide	13:00-14:00 Picnic bag	14:00-15:30 - visit of Praz De Farcoz site - Saint Rhémy north gate site Accompanied by Local Alpine Guide 16:00 - Visit Saint-Oyen site - visit to wood workshop 18:00 Transfer with bus to Courmayeur 19:30 Arrival in Courmayeur accommodation	20:00 Dinner	Accommodation in hotel - Courmayeur
Day 5	10:00 – 13:00 Official presentation to local administration of the work – Polito Students - Visit to hotel Ange – recently recovered	13:00-14:00 Catering	14:00–17:00 SKYWAY + afternoon tea	20:00 Dinner Pont Saint Martin	Accommodation in hotel - Pont Saint Martin
Day 6	8:30 – 13:00 Field visit to the lower section of the Via Francigena in the Lower Valley, from Hône to Donnas (5km in total) - Visit to Forte di Bard. - Visit to the Antica Latteria di Treby in Donnas.	13:00-14:00 Picnic bag	14:00-15:30 Meeting with local architects and stone workers (Fratelli Ferrari Lavorazione Pietra Ollare, Local stone worker, Pont-Saint-Martin) - visit with local architect to the work in Settimo Vittone Castle Leaving from Donnas (AO) train station to Porta Nuova (TO)	20:00 Dinner in Turin	Accommodation in hotel - Turin
Day 7		13:00-14:00 Lunch in Turin	16:00 – 18:00 scientific seminar in Polito	20:00 Dinner in Turin	Night in Turin

Local stakeholders involved

Institutional Representatives

Alberto Pacifico Ciabattoni, Major, Municipality of Saint-Rhémy-en-Bosses
Luciano Bonetti, Council Member, Municipality of Gignod
Roberto Ruffier, Coordinator of Fondazione Courmayeur Mont Blanc, Courmayeur
Barbara Scarpari, Member of Fondazione Courmayeur Mont Blanc, Courmayeur
Elise Champvillair, Member of Fondazione Courmayeur Mont Blanc, Courmayeur

Professionals

Alessandro Servalli, Architect, Gaby
Luciano Bonetti, Architect, Gignod

Local Artisans and Producers

Estrabocon Factory - Julien Cerisey, local woodworker and owner of a historic water-powered sawmill, Saint-Oyen
Fratelli Ferrari Lavorazione Pietra Ollare, Local stone worker, Pont-Saint-Martin
Frères Diemoz, Local livestock farmer and cheese production, Saint-Rhémy-en-Bosses
Chez Duclos, Local cheese producer, Gignod
Les Bières du Grand St. Bernard, Local craft beer producer, Gignod