



# Forgotten Heritage of World War II, the Narratives of the French Alps fortifications



*Explore Lab 37\_Research Plan*

Lise Sarda

Research Tutor\_  
Sabina Tanović

Design Tutor\_  
Aleksandar Staničić

Msc3-Master Architecture, urbanism and Building Sciences  
2023-2024





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I want to express my deepest gratitude to the members of the association Musée de la Traversée des Alpes. For their dedication and passion for sharing history have been a constant source of inspiration throughout this project.

A thank you to Laurent Demouzon for sharing his experiences and for all his hard work researching first-hand accounts. His insights and expertise have significantly enriched my understanding and appreciation of the historical context.

Thanks also to Antoine from Les Historateurs association for his contributions to this research. His enthusiasm and commitment to historical preservation and share of knowledge have been truly motivating.

Finally, a special thank you to Manu for his constant support, his passion to this particular heritage and his motivation to share history. His support has been instrumental in the successful completion of this project.

To all these individuals, to my teachers and family, your contributions have been invaluable, and I am deeply appreciative of your generosity and dedication.

«All I can do is describe what I see within the limits of my understanding.» Curated Decay

# Acknowledg



(Musée de la Traversée des Alpes) Member

In Replaton



TTA Member

Manu

Fig 2 \_Replaton 2023. By Author.

# ements



*This research paper delves into the Maginot fortifications of the Second World War in Maurienne, a region nestled in the French Alps. The objective is to unravel the layers of this war heritage examining collected narratives to comprehend its material existence. Focusing on a distinctive architectural object within a specific geographical area, this study aims to provide a profound understanding of the interconnections between the physical integrity of heritage and its ethnographic narratives. In particular, the paper centers on the expression of human perception regarding architecture.*

The French Alps, as well as being a major tourist destination, a fantasy for wilderness and the birthplace of the Sublime, have also been the theatre of numerous conflicts. From Roman times to the Second World War, its passes and valleys served as a crucial battleground and a strategic crossroads for unification and trade, largely thanks to the Col du Mont-Cenis (Milleret, R. 1997). With the rise of Fascism in several European countries, particularly Italy, France fortified its borders with the construction of the Maginot Line, stretching from Nord Pas de Calais to Corsica (Demouzon, L. 1997). From 1938, on each side of the Alps borders, countries modernise their forts and built works to install machine guns and cannons (Milleret, R. 1997). As a reaction to the growing paranoia of an impending conflict. Substantial investments in positioning military infrastructure within the mountainous terrain were made. However, after the end of the Second World War and following the creation of the United Nations Organisation and later the end of the Cold War, the primary function of these military infrastructures became obsolete, relegating them to a state of neglect. Today, they stand as silent witnesses to a bygone era, their concrete structures and corroded steel remnants of a turbulent past, often overlooked amidst the mountainous landscape.

Between the succession of narrow valleys and high passes, connecting Italy to France in the Maurienne, were nestled large defensive works. Le Lavoir, Pas du Roc, Arrondaz, Fréjus, Sapey (Demouzon, L. 1997), the works consist of a series of casemates linked by an intricate underground infrastructure. The blocks emerging from the ground are built of reinforced concrete, making them almost invulnerable. Self-sufficient, they could withstand military siege for several days or weeks thanks to their food and diesel reserves (Demouzon, L. 1997). Digging deep into the ground was the main building strategy but the rocks were difficult to carve, and the harsh winter conditions put the construction work on a timing, the short and cold days making it nearly impossible.

As the landscape morphed into a construction site, blockhouses and barbed wire networks sprouted, altering the once-pristine Alpine scenery (Demouzon, L. 1997). The year 1939 saw Italian and French troops facing off in the Alps, with Mussolini launching an attack on June 10, 1940, following the German invasion from the north (Milleret, R. 1997). This decision was

met with dismay by the local populations, as both French and Italians were hesitant to fight against their cousins, especially considering the French assistance to Italy during the First World War (Demouzon, L. 1997). The Battle of the Alps, which lasted a mere twelve days, was a violent upheaval for the local population, who were forced to abandon their homes and, for the young men, forced to join the fight. The French 'Armée des Alpes' held out until the armistice with Italy was declared, with only a few ridges and upper valley villages occupied by the Italians (Milleret, R. 1997). However, due to the German campaigns in the north of France, the French delegation in the armistice negotiations was defeated (Schiavon, M., & Le Moal, F. 2010), leading to Italian and German occupations. Towards the end of the Second World War, a second battle ensued to free the French territories from occupation, led by the Resistance and American troops. By the end of 1944, the Germans gradually retreated, but remained in the Maurienne region, the gateway to Italy, until the winter of 1944-1945 (Milleret, R. 1997). The Battle of the Alps, while a small victory in the grand scale of the Second World War, prevented the annexation of the Alpine border territories and the captivity of many French soldiers. It was a testament to the resilience of the Alpine Army, who, despite losing the war, emerged victorious in a battle fought against the elements and the will to defend their valleys and homes (Demouzon, L. 2000).

The abandonment and neglect of the Fortifications suggests an evolution in their significance for both the public and the State. In many cases, the very existence of these structures is ignored, even by the locals. Their concealed locations, remoteness, and the historical and military symbolism they encapsulate appear to have hastened their deterioration. This research aims to elucidate the symbolism associated with World war II fortifications at different scales and their position within the built environment. The primary focus is on understanding how the collective understanding of the Maginot Line fortifications in the French Alps is reflected in narratives and how do they influence the materiality of the fortifications. These structures, laden with history and meaning, are open to interpretation, offering a glimpse into the past and the changing perceptions of war and defence. The Maurienne region within the French Alps will be the focus area for the study. With a continuous border with Italy, the region was equipped with numerous fortifications in the 1930s.

As we explore the narratives surrounding the Maginot Line fortifications, the abandonment and neglect of these fortifications reflect a complex interplay between the collective understanding, societal perceptions, and the evolving symbolic meaning of these structures. Bennett's insight illuminates these dynamic relationships. In *The bunker's Afterlife* (2020), his assertion that meanings and uses of these places evolve over time, shaped by societal trends and individual engagements, underscores the transformative nature of these structures.



The narratives surrounding the Maginot Line are not static; they adapt to societal shifts, reflecting diverse perspectives and purposes. As individual actors appropriate the bunkers, projecting their own needs onto the spaces, the materiality of the fortifications becomes a canvas for evolving collective interpretations—a process that is essential for understanding the complex layers of the Maginot Line's afterlife.

The interest of this research is to analyse the materiality of World War II fortifications in the French Alps and its ethnographic narratives as a way of expressing the influence of a collective understanding of history on architecture. A two-week study trip offered direct encounters, allowing for a deep understanding of the structures. Engaging with locals during this journey provided an authentic backdrop for collecting narratives. Extensive analysis of documentation, including maps, videos, literature, and newspapers across different periods, helped me create a more reinforced historical framework in which to situate my case-study. Interviews with fortification enthusiasts and experts contributed to nuanced insights. A photo report supports each chapter, capturing the material essence and the evolving nature of these structures. This multi-layered approach aims to construct a comprehensive study showing the alpine Maginot Bunkers in a new light. That of an encounter, a material, an embodied memory of the war and ultimately a shelter. The first chapter defines the bunkers as encounters. Exploring how and why the Alpine fortifications of the Second World War were forgotten and rejected. The second chapter will examine the influence of the bunker's materiality on our perception of it. How entropy is reflected in the bunker. The third chapter explores the ways in which memory is an essence of the fortification. Finally, the fourth chapter investigates the sheltering aspects of the structures.

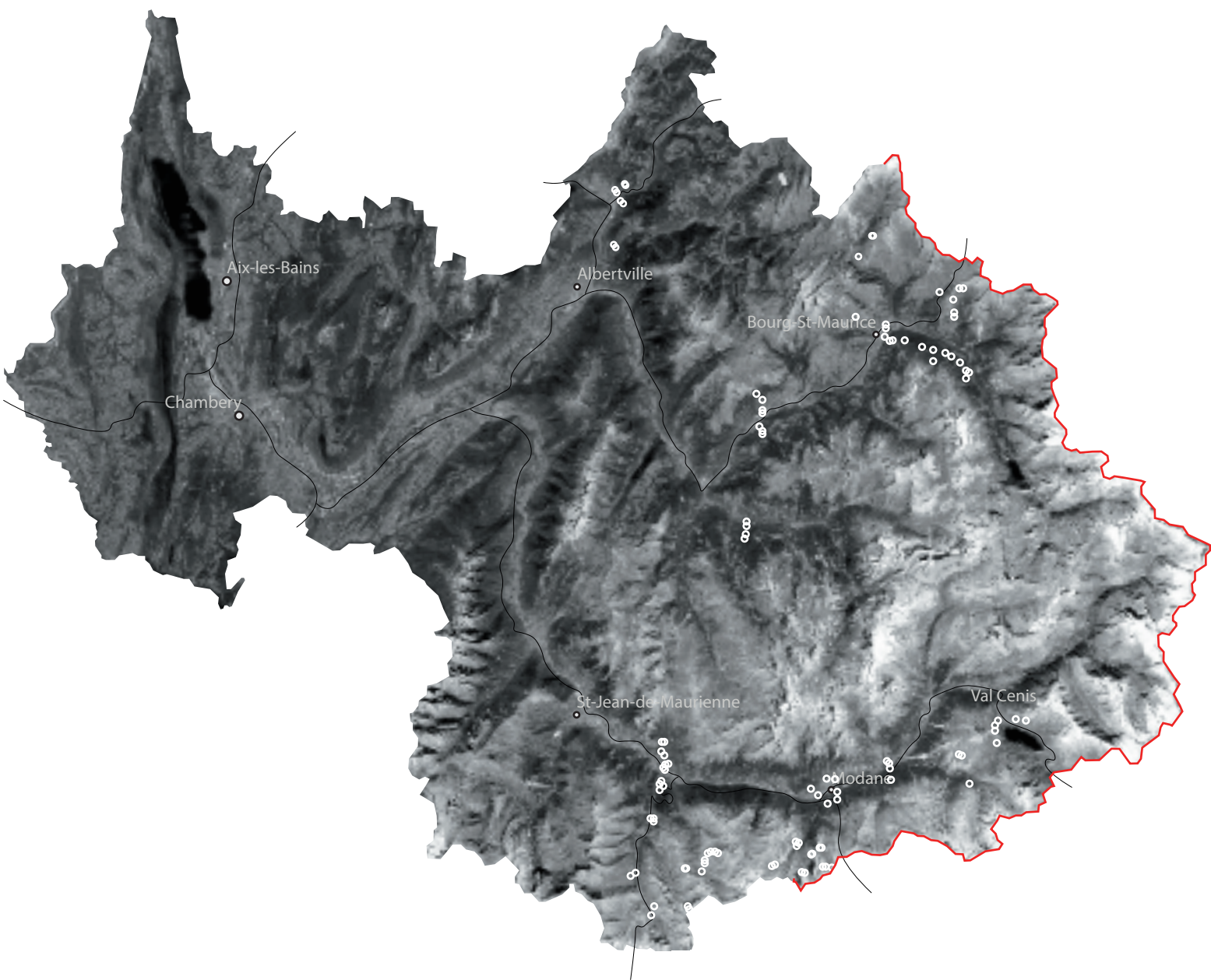


Fig 3\_ Map of the Maginot fortifications in the Maurienne Region, By Author 2024. Satellite picture extracted from <https://remonterletemps.ign.fr/comparer/basic?x=6.367738&y=45.500952&z=10&layer1=ORTHOIMAGERY.ORTHOPHOTOS2006-2010&layer2=GEOGRAPHICALGRIDSYSMS.PLANIGNV2&mode=vSlider>

# Methodology

I believe in architecture for the people. To be an architect is to design for human well-being and needs. This starts with analysing the project's environment to identify potential gaps and necessities. Next, we must consider the users: who they are, their habits, and their desires. By studying these two main aspects of a project, the likelihood of creating a design that is used, integrated, and has long-term potential increases.

For this project, the user was the main focus of the design process. Narratives provide insights into testimonies, needs, fears, knowledge, or gaps in knowledge. By incorporating and analysing these narratives, architects can create a human-centered project that is deeply integrated into customs, culture, and the environment, ensuring the project's longevity.



# FORGOTTEN HERITAGE OF WORLD WAR II, THE NARRATIVES OF THE FRENCH ALPS FORTIFICATIONS

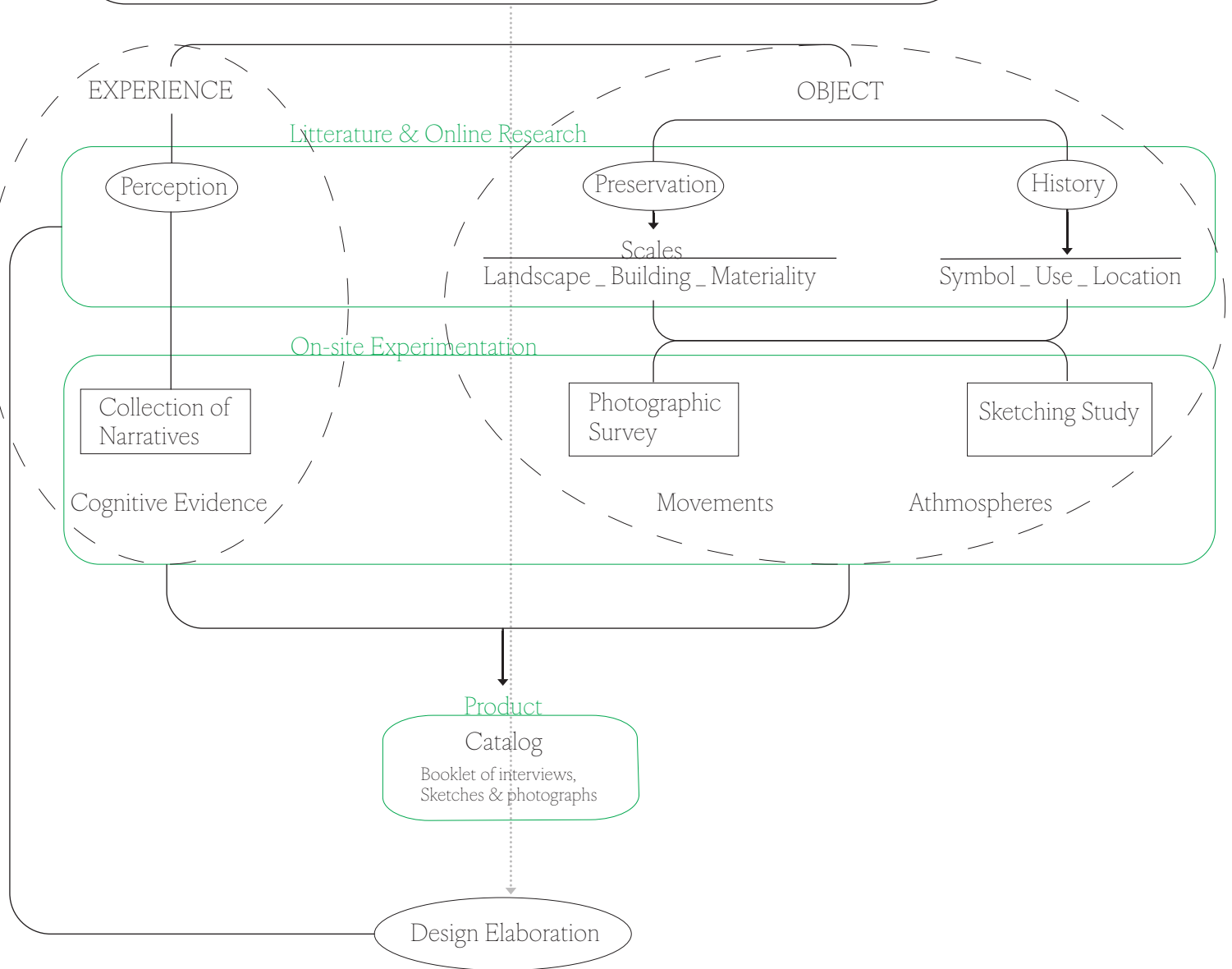


Fig 4\_ Diagram of Research. By Author 2023

The narratives of the French Alps fortifications are rooted in a tumultuous past of territorial and ideological wars. They are fixed both in the specific discourse of the alpine and rural milieu and in the general discourse of bunkers. By immersing myself in theoretical literature on the significance of bunkers and historical literature on the military past of the Maurienne region, a knowledge base was built for the narratives of WWII Alpine bunkers. Analysing historical maps and images of the area helped anchor these narratives in the visual and spatial context of the time, while a series of interviews connected them to the current narratives of local populations. To collect varied and contemporary narratives, I contacted enthusiasts through Facebook blogs and organised a field trip to Maurienne to meet them. This trip also allowed me to personally experience the fortifications for the first time, bringing a testimony of cognitive evidence and that of the people that accompanied me on this trip. Interacting with the structures raises questions like: What is there to say about the bunker? What does the bunker have to say? How can I use it in a design to reconnect this heritage to us and create more knowledge about it?





As a native of this region, I can consider specific cultural aspects related to education, which strongly impact the narratives of the Alpine bunkers. This field trip enabled me to interview various individuals from different backgrounds and ages, whether they were aware of these fortifications or not.

By engaging with the Alpine bunkers, I defined themes encapsulating the fortification experience: Encounter, Materiality, Memory, and Shelter. Within these themes, I approach the bunker through four focus lenses over different scales. This experience is documented in a drawn travel journal and a photographic report and analysed through the connection to the literature and theoretical framework mentioned above.

These four pillars of my research form a strong foundation feeding into my design, focused on the specific site of Les Rochilles. Each aspect of the research is used in the design to orient the human body into experiencing this forgotten heritage and regaining knowledge about it, thus connecting and reinforcing our identities.



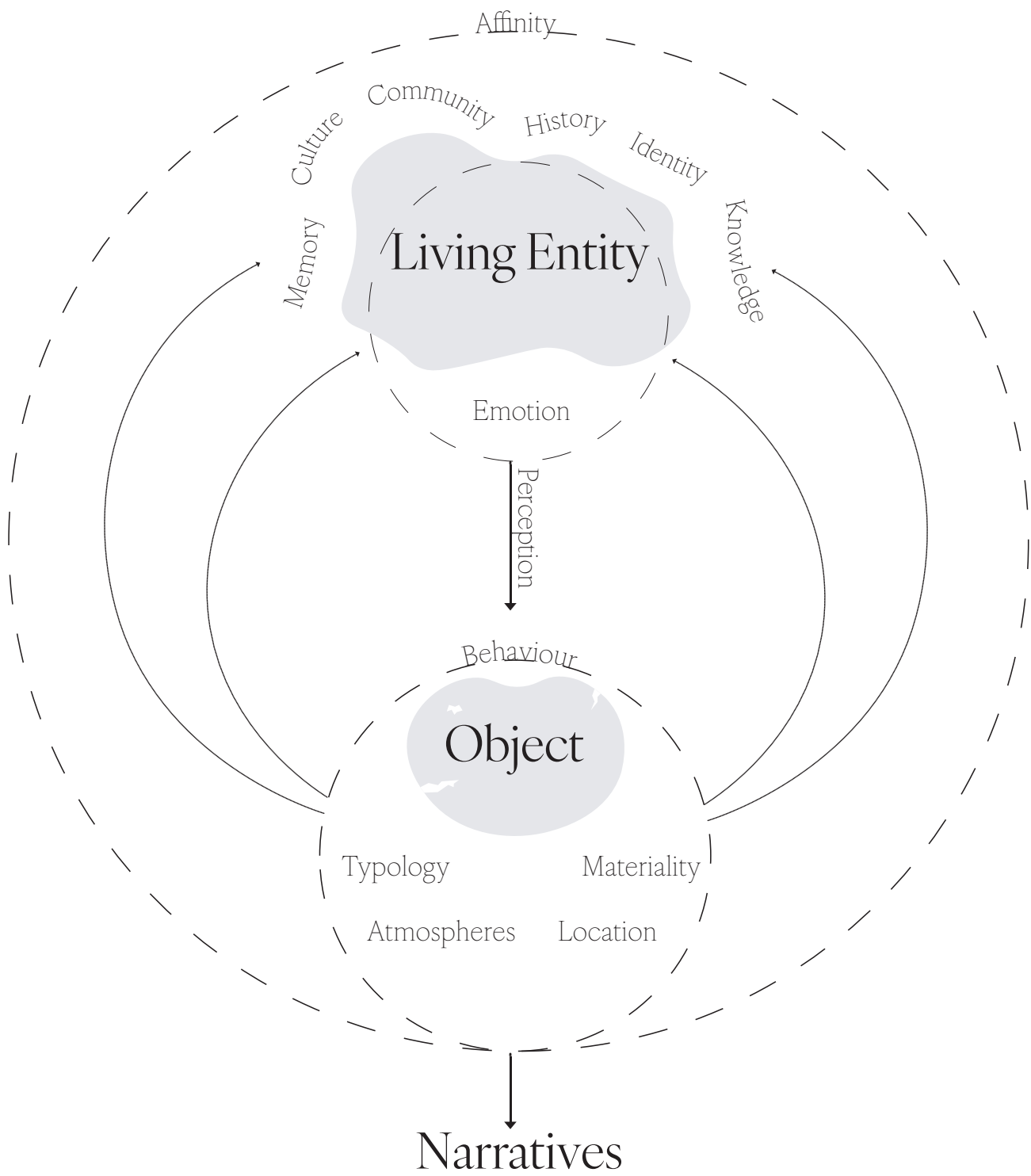


Fig 6\_Diagram Theoretical Framework. By Author 2023.

# Forgotten Heritage of World War II, the Narratives of the French Alps fortifications





*As we delve into the Maginot Line's lore,  
We find a tale of neglect and more.  
But in their decay, a story unfolds,  
Of shifting meanings, of tales untold.  
For meanings change, as time goes by,  
Shaped by trends, and individual's eye.  
They become a seed.  
A seed of stories,  
A seed of history  
So let us explore, let us understand,  
The complex layers, of this land.  
For the Maurienne region, in the French Alps,  
Is a place of stories, of history's scars.*



Spotted high above, my eye is drawn to the cracked concrete, the rough, mysterious silhouette. What is its secret?  
The slow lament of the structure is crying out with stories to be explored.  
The sensitive souls will know how to listen!  
Following a narrow path, each of my steps is a pressing effort towards discovery. At every curve and every hill, new traces are revealed. With each new person I meet, snippets of stories emerge.

On this journey, eight fortifications are unveiled. Each one is unique and has its own context. However, they all share similar experiences.  
The excitement of discovery, - Encounter  
the anxiety produced by the decay, - Materiality  
the weight of encapsulated memories, - Memory  
the surprising nature of the inhabitant, - Shelter

Where do these feelings come from? What is the nature of the connection between humans and the Alpine bunker?

# An Encounter

*A family walk around a waterfall in the valley.  
Skiing to high-altitude lakes.  
On a tour of Mont Blanc in the freshness of the summer valleys.  
A drive to the ski stations.  
Renting a chalet in the forest, away from the noise of the valley.  
Opening the hotel window to let in the fresh morning air.  
Going to the waste collection centre.  
Where the unexpected happens.*



Fig 7\_Photography Ouvrage de Seloges, By Author 2023



## Excitement of Discovery

The Maginot fortifications of the Alps, which stood for decades, were built as bunkers. Built as a static position for a war of territories that never transpired (Bennett, L. 2020), the reconfiguration of defence models through innovations and the establishment of new kind of war led to the obsolescence of many structures (Gatti, M. P., & Cacciaguerra, G. 2014). This was the starting point for the neglect of the Alpine fortifications. From the 2000s, some bunkers were reintroduced into 'civilian' use through auctions. Municipalities and enthusiasts associations became the owners. Due to a lack of funds and public interest, most of the bunkers continued to fall in ruination.

During the study trip, each person interviewed, apart from fortification enthusiasts from the various associations contacted, was surprised by the origin of these structures and sometimes even by their very existence.

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Sometimes the presence of the structures are known but their historical context is a mystery to the population.

Interview extract with hikers on the route des Rochilles\_

« F2- I am not sure if there is any (Maginot Fortification) around here, it is more towards Alsace no ? (North-East France)

L- Actually the construction works in the region are also part of the Maginot Line, it was built all the way down to Corsica along the border !

M1- Oh really ? We learned something today then! »

At the heart of a local conflict between populations united by their Alpine culture and later, a base for the various occupying enemy divisions, the bunkers were deliberately forgotten by locals. As Virilio points out in his book *Bunker Archeology* for the works on the Atlantic Wall, these structures attract resentment, like a symbol of the events from which they arose. According to Virilio, this is what drives the Maginot fortifications into social repression. Today, in the case of the French Alps, it is not so much resentment that marks the structure as indifference. With their strong military appearance, they are evocative of the dark times.

At the end of the Second World War, France embarked on a policy of 'all resistance fighters' (Rousso, H. 1991). Indeed, it was thanks to the resistance of a few Frenchmen and British and American troops that French territory was reconquered. In order to reunite the people and build a new national pride, this ideological strategy was put in place. It consisted of highlighting the Resistance's maquis, commemorations, building monuments, publicising testimonies and teaching in schools. In comparison, the stories of the Vichy regime's collaboration, military defeats and the general fiasco of the Maginot Line were more likely to be sidelined in public communications and in schools (Rousso, H. 1991). Thus, the history of the Battle of the Alps, a negligible victory in the mechanics of the Second World War, was not covered at school and gradually fell into national oblivion. One has to search expressly for information to unveil their story.

■ Modane

## La ligne Maginot des Alpes

Il est temps de guérir, autant que faire se peut, une vieille blessure infligée à notre orgueil national. Non, la ligne Maginot n'a pas partout été vaincue, défaite, ridiculisée. C'est entendu, à l'est de la France, les divisions blindées du Reich ont foncé à travers les Ardennes, évitant les batteries fortifiées d'une armée française partisane de la guerre d'attente... Il s'ensuivit la débâcle de mai 1940 ! Mais dans les Alpes, au moins, ce fut une autre histoire. Car, il faut s'en souvenir, la « ligne de défense à

200 millions de francs Poincaré » se poursuivait le long de la frontière franco-italienne. Il s'agissait là de se prémunir contre les visées expansionnistes de l'Italie mussolinienne, alliée de l'Allemagne dans le pacte d'Acier. Et les troupes du Duce s'y sont cassé les dents. « Des combats parfois très durs ont eu lieu. Mais les Italiens n'étaient pas très bien équipés. Ils portaient des semelles en carton dans la neige », raconte Michel Vial, président de l'Association du Musée de la Traversée des Alpes.

En 1991, ce retraité de la Police nationale et une poignée de passionnés ont racheté un des 90 ouvrages du système de défense alpin. Surveillant la route du col du Mont-Cenis, le fort Saint-Gobain, tout près de Modane, est le seul ouvrage Maginot de la région ouvert à la visite. Casernements enfouis, salle des machines, postes de tir : les quelques centaines de mètres de galeries enterrées à 17 mètres sous la montagne se visitent comme un sous-marin. « Tout était prévu pour pouvoir tenir un siège de trois mois », raconte Michel Vial, qui sait évoquer avec gouaille la morne existence de la garnison. Car, à Saint-Gobain, on n'a pas tiré un coup de canon : l'armistice est arrivé avant l'ennemi... S. C.

Fort Saint-Gobain à Modane, Musée de la Traversée des Alpes (04-79-05-16-52).



Ouvrage Maginot de Saint-Gobain

Newspaper extract illustrating the national discourse on this cultural heritage

« It is time to heal, as best we can, an old wound inflicted on our national pride. No, the Maginot Line was not in vain everywhere, defeated and ridiculed. Of course, in eastern France, the Reich's armoured divisions rushed through the Ardennes, avoiding the fortified batteries of a French army that had opted for a waiting game...

The result was the defeat of May 1940! But in the Alps, at least, it was a different story. The «200 million Poincaré franc defence line» ran along the Franco-Italian border. The aim was to guard against the expansionist ambitions of Mussolini's Italy, Germany's ally in the Pact of Steel. And the Duce's troops broke their teeth. «The fighting was sometimes very fierce. But the Italians weren't very well equipped. They wore cardboard soles in the snow», says Michel Vial, president of the Alpine Crossing Museum Association.

In 1991, this retired member of the French National Police and a handful of enthusiasts bought back one of the 90 works of the Alpine defence system. Guarding the road to the Mont-Cenis pass, Fort Saint-Gobain, just outside Modane, is the only Maginot fort in the region open to the public. Buried barracks, engine room, firing points: the several hundred metres of galleries buried 17 metres beneath the mountain can be visited like a submarine. « Everything was designed to withstand a three-month siege,» recounts Michel Vial, who knows how to evoke the dreary existence of the garrison. Because no cannon was fired at Saint-Gobain: the armistice happened before the enemy did... »

Fig 8. Scanned article on the Alpine Maginot Line. L'Obs, 1993.  
Translation by Author.

The general ignorance of the very existence of the Maginot structures in the Alps makes the paths close to the former Franco-Italian border full of unexpected surprises.

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The narrative of experts from the Alpine region highlights the extent to which the fortifications have been forgotten.

Interview extract with a guide on the route des Rochilles\_

L- You told me you walked in the region close to the Rochilles once with clients. When doing so, do you mention the history of the region and show the remains (like the 'Camp des Rochilles')?

A- At the time I didn't know about the Alpine Maginot Line yet. I only found out about it two years ago, back then I thought the Maginot Line stopped further North, above the border with Switzerland. I read about it in an article in the Guides Magazine on the 'Little Maginot Line', and that's how I found out about it.

The fortifications were designed to surprise potential invaders. To do so, their galleries were buried under layers of soil and rocks. Each emerging block was camouflaged. Paintings and even rocks were sometimes stuck on to the concrete as a way to protect their physical integrity and that of the souls they sheltered against attacks and bombing. Their secretive nature, both in design and positioning, is an obstacle to interpretation. One has to look for details in a broad landscape (Bennett, L. 2020), pushing the structure further into oblivion as the men who saw them built disappear.

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The memories of soldiers who took part in the war express just how traumatic this period was, which explains the rejection of the bunkers, as a structure personifying the war and its memories.

Interview extract with fortification enthusiast Manu in Maurienne\_

L- Did your grandparents who fought in the war tell you anything about their experience?

M- One of them very quickly explained to me that he was a soldier in the Battle of the Alps and that he was assigned to the bunker Pas du Roc...The other one, I know he was assigned at Mont Cenis, but never said anything. He took everything with him to the grave, and in the light of what his fellow soldiers have told me it was better that way. It wasn't pretty.

Standing in a landscape steeped in the culture of the sublime, their existence brings two different realities into collision (Virilio, P. 1994). That of a place of leisure, passion and search for wilderness. Where families, hikers and climbers come together to take a break from the hustle and bustle of society. Suddenly faced with a vestige, a concrete landmark whose appearance evokes wartime memories. The thick concrete, cracked by humidity and only open for observation and defence, is intimidating. The harshness of its exterior is a visible scar from our past.

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The immovable structure is a cry in the peaceful landscape. Its heavy, broken appearance is a burden on the eye.

« In this naturalness, was the scandal of the bunker »

Virilio, P. (1994) Bunker Archeology

When confronted with these works, one is dumbfounded. At such an altitude, how would one expect such works? Firstly, because of the contrast between its military nature and the serenity of the Alps. Then, as one ventures in, one realises the enormous effort that had to be deployed to build and inhabit the site. Often carved out of the cliff or into the slopes, the thick reinforced concrete, heavy metal doors and observation domes were hauled up by men or donkeys to an altitude of more than 2,600 metres. The Lavoir structure, reaching down to a depth of 97m, or the Pas du Roc structure, perched in the cliffs (Mary, JY. Hohnadel, A. Sicard, J. 2003). How were they built, or even imagined? So remote and in the conditions of a building site in the mountains, meaning shortened times and difficult temperatures. How were the soldiers able to endure living conditions for weeks on end at such an altitude, in structures where sometimes the raw rock is the only protective wall against the snow, wind and cold?

Extract from a discussion with Gauthier M.\_

G- (...) I'd already visited some (bunkers) in Alsace or Normandy, up in the North. And it's actually really different, they are visible square blocks, whereas here there are a lot of galleries and they are buried! It's really strange that they were built so remote, it's not really understandable.

In my pursuit of the bunkers, inspired by the testimonies of the people I met and my own experience as a native, these structures appeared to be hidden and forgotten. They nonetheless arouse curiosity under the same terms. In the manner of Egyptian tombs, they reflect a little-known and mysterious past. And the most striking testimonies are to be found within them.

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The experience of the bunker as deserted space, years after the battles and in the ignorance of the heavy history encapsulated within, almost feels like a treasure hunt : looking for hints of the past in this dark underground world.





Fig 9 \_Double exposure Photograph in Seloge. By Author (2023).



Hidden & non accessible battlefield of Mt Cenis



Concrete cubes protrude from the forest in places,

# Inaccessible





revealing the fort.



Walking in the snow



Avalanche on the way !



Closed roads





Plants are colonising the Structure  
The weathering of the concrete gives a  
rock like appearance.



Half buried, this entrance reveals  
camouflage paintwork -

# Camouflaged





Cracked concrete blends in  
the forest.  
Vegetation takes over!



Using Vernacular construction  
techniques for reinforcement &  
camouflage.



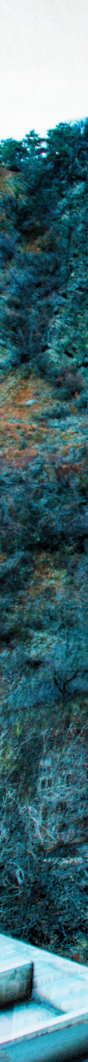
The fortification's presence  
is revealed to the curious  
who can spot the heaves...



An old fence blocking the access to  
Observation point, first visible heave on the walk to les Rochilles



# Announced







Replaton

Orientation panel to  
a "Monument aux Morts"  
celebrating the soldiers  
who died here,  
Suggesting the presence  
of a fortification  
nearby



The view from my hotel room.  
A not so hidden, yet unknown structure.





# Materiality

*In concrete hues, a silent form,  
Camouflaged amidst the storm.*

*Concrete caverns, time's travail.  
A new soil where stories dwell.*



Fig. 22\_Photograph Les Rochilles, By Author (2023).

## Anxiety of Decay

The bunker, as cast of concrete, is designed so thick it could protect from anything. But hidden away in the mountains, it is rather a network of underground galleries that we discover/uncover, dug out of the rock. The movement of pickaxes and dynamite are engraved on to the walls and ceiling. In numerous structures, galleries open onto the outside in basic blocks of reinforced concrete. Like in mines, raw galleries in Alpine structures go deep into the mountain, revealing all the construction stages and sometimes even the tools. Unlike a bunker fantasy, concrete is not always the material of choice. The Amodon galleries are covered in stone masonry. The Seloges structure, covered by an embankment to provide added protection and camouflage, is partly constructed of steel domes and masonry stones. The different constructions adapt to the terrain and, making use of local resources, are cleverly camouflaged in the surrounding landscape.

With the time passing, life develops naturally on and in the bunker, by virtue of its primary materiality. It provides a natural camouflage for the structures. The construction reveals a purely mineral, cave-like environment inside. Lichen, moss, shrubs and mould have begun to cover the interior and exterior elements. The vibrant green and orange of the lichens spread from the rock to the concrete. Every gap in the structure is overgrown with vegetation. It's an architecture of disappearance (Bennett, L. 2011), as the colours of the built structure merge with those of the surrounding landscape, creating a summary of its surroundings (Virilio, P. 1994).

The high level of humidity inside the structure paves the way for condensation and infiltration. With the highly calcareous environment of the region, concretions are created under the vaults of the corridors, continuously dripping with water. The grey of the concrete, streaked with white under the action of the freeze-thaw and the surrounding humidity, disappears against a background of rocks. A Kintsuge impression emerges: the object is vulnerable, laid bare by the intensity of the wait. The sound of the water flows resonates like an irregular lamentation. The wind, gusting through the old shooting stations, blows into the galleries. Fractures, landslides and bare, oxidised materials illustrate a profound suffering within the fortifications.

The burden of the symbol it embodies makes the fortress vulnerable. This vulnerability of the object is a reflection of our own human wounds, inherited from the war. Seeing the object unharmed creates a rejection of the immediacy of war. Encountering it when it has been neglected reveals a memory that has been unearthed. The disappearance of the object is a symbol of oblivion.

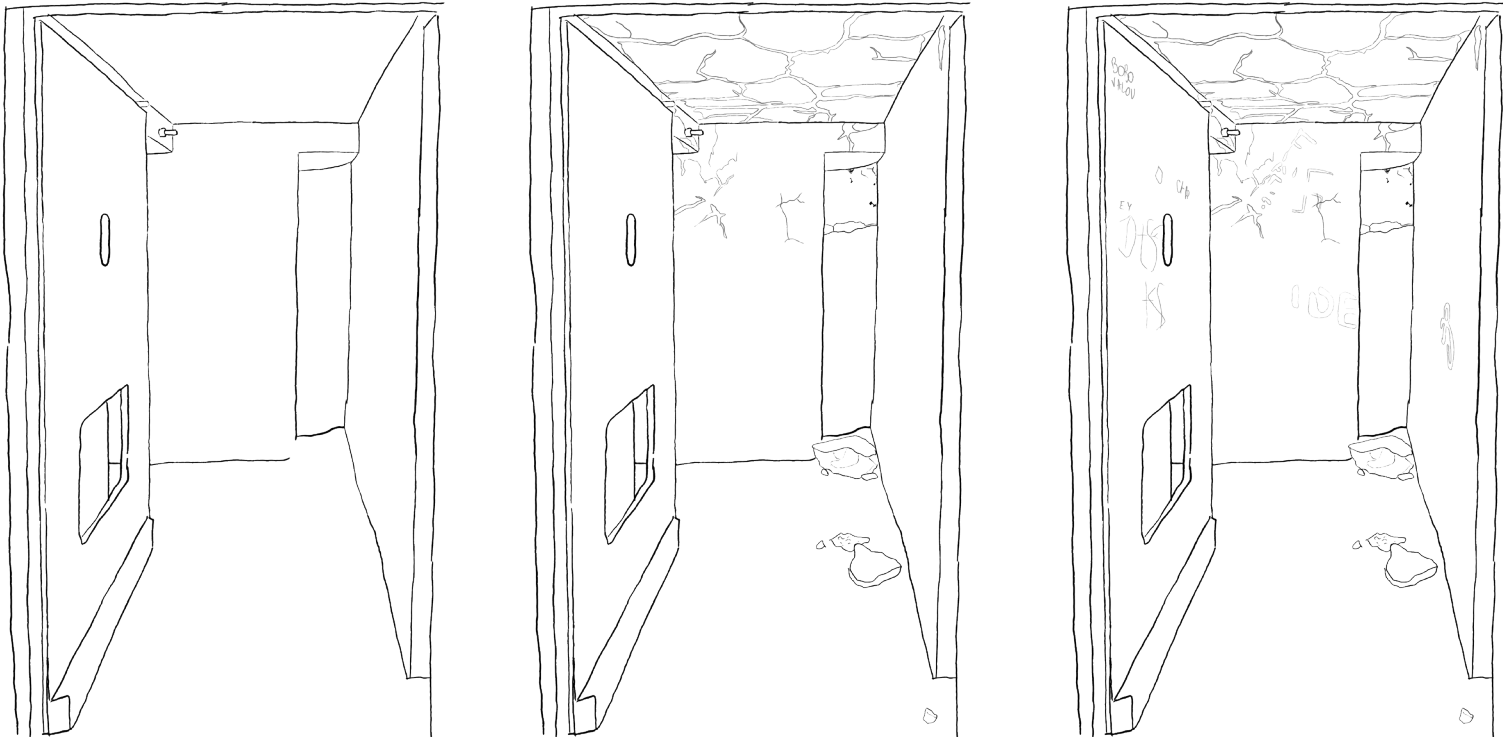


Fig 23 \_Drawing phases of decay by Author (2023).

« The vulnerable object becomes us, and its unmaking threatens to unmake our identities as well.»

DeSilvey C. (2017) Curated Decay, p.13.

Struck by the rotting that the structure undergoes, the visitor senses the memory it holds crumbling with it. Our identity is forged by our memory-history-culture-community-knowledge (Bennett, L. 2011). The erasure of physical reminders of a history already obscured by shame and suffering, like the case of the WWII Alpine bunkers, deprives us of a precious communal and personal heritage. Our identity is hindered, for as George Kubler (2008) explains in his book *The Shape of Time*, remarks on the history of things, «Like crustaceans we depend for survival upon an outer skeleton, upon a shell of historic cities & houses filled with things belonging to definable portions of the past» (p.1). The neglect, pillage and weathering of the structures and remains deprive us of the encapsulated history. This habit of neglect, clearly expressed through the oxidations of the different materials, is underlining a compelling sense of change. It is the obvious reflection of passing years, changing opinions and the ruination of an unrecognised heritage. Standing out in the landscape of the «sublime», forgotten in the immensity of a seemingly timeless landscape, the bunker is an indicator of our own obsolescence.



As a result of this neglect, the structure is crumbling and decaying, feeding the biodiversity of its surroundings. It becomes a source of new life, a soil allowing for a new ecosystem to grow in the traces of human toxicity. This is further exacerbated by the absence of human activity and the passage of insects and animals as the seasons change.

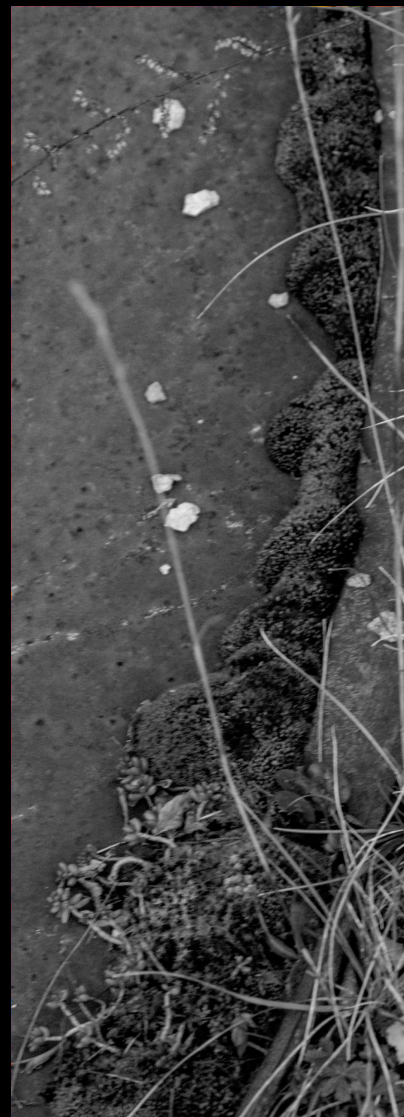
### « The concrete mass is a summary of its surroundings»

Virilio P. (1994), Bunker Archeology p.

The surroundings imprint the structures with a varying level of persistence: visiting locals leave footprints in the dust covering the floor, mountain goats defecate in the alcoves, groundhogs looking for shelter leaves only their bones, mould grows under the plaster on the walls, stormy rain floods the underground passages and seeps through the cracks of the worn-out concrete... Entropy is perpetuated within the bunker walls.

The New Soil aspect that the structure takes on as it becomes integrated into the surrounding biodiversity can be likened to a composting process. Indeed, the decomposition of materials nurturing a web of microbial life that, in turn, feeds plants again, is the definition of Compost (De Vlaam C., Zuidervaart N., van Berestijn J., Scheeren J., Something H. 2023). How long does composting take when the base is concrete? Made of water, dust and gravel, this material is considered to be the most resistant when it comes to buildings (Bennett, L. 2011) . And here it is, before our eyes, in an advanced state of decomposition. A hint of temporality. Raising the question of our own temporality in the world and that of our civilisation.

Entering my first bunker, and then eleven other structures, it is the processes of neglect that grabbed my attention. As time goes by, the entropy processes that regulate ecosystems also apply to the bunker, rendering them vulnerable to the elements and breathing life in the deserted corridors. As the concrete crumbles and the echoes of war fade, a poignant truth emerges: these bunkers serve as tangible markers of a shared history, a testament to the resilience and fragility of human existence. The neglect they endure mirrors our own struggles with memory and identity, reminding us of a difficult war and its heritage. Like layers of compost enriching the soil, the decomposition of these structures heralds a broader reflection on temporality and the cyclical nature of life. Ultimately, within these mineral realms, we find not just relics of conflict, but echoes of our own impermanence and the enduring power of nature's reclaiming touch.









the bunker's materiality recalls a mineral world.



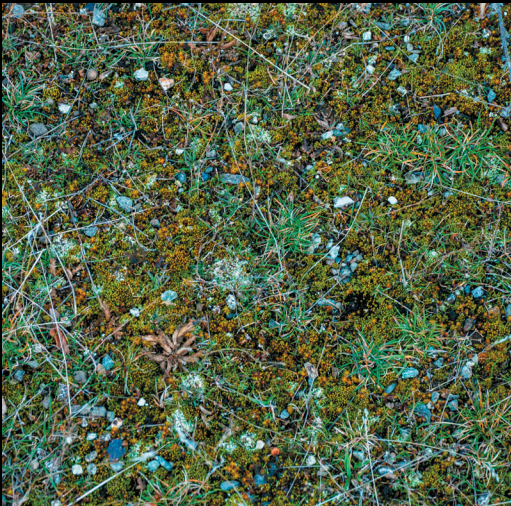
the concretions and excavated walls create a cave-like  
the concrete structure is, overtime, acting like a soil.







environnement





# Memory

*In the earth's embrace, a memory etched,  
Of wars waged and history stretched.  
Bunker's silhouette, a relic to find,  
Lost in the landscape, a key to the mind.*

*A time capsule buried, tales unfold,  
Heritage hidden, yet stories retold.  
In echoes of conflict, a memory's grace,  
A bunker stands, a silent embrace.*



Fig. 45\_Photograph on the path to Les Rochilles, By Author (2023).

## Encapsulated Memories

The concrete mass, cracked and broken by the years and its harsh environment, also carries the weight of memory. A fragile, heavy memory of past battles. A memory carried by a few passionate individuals and the crumbling grey walls of abandoned bunkers. Their few dark openings and their rude appearance stand in the landscape as well as in the collective mind as a place of destruction, a symbol of the global fear and paranoia that lead to the construction of such structures (Bennett, L. 2011).

« Fear of attack physically written upon the land »

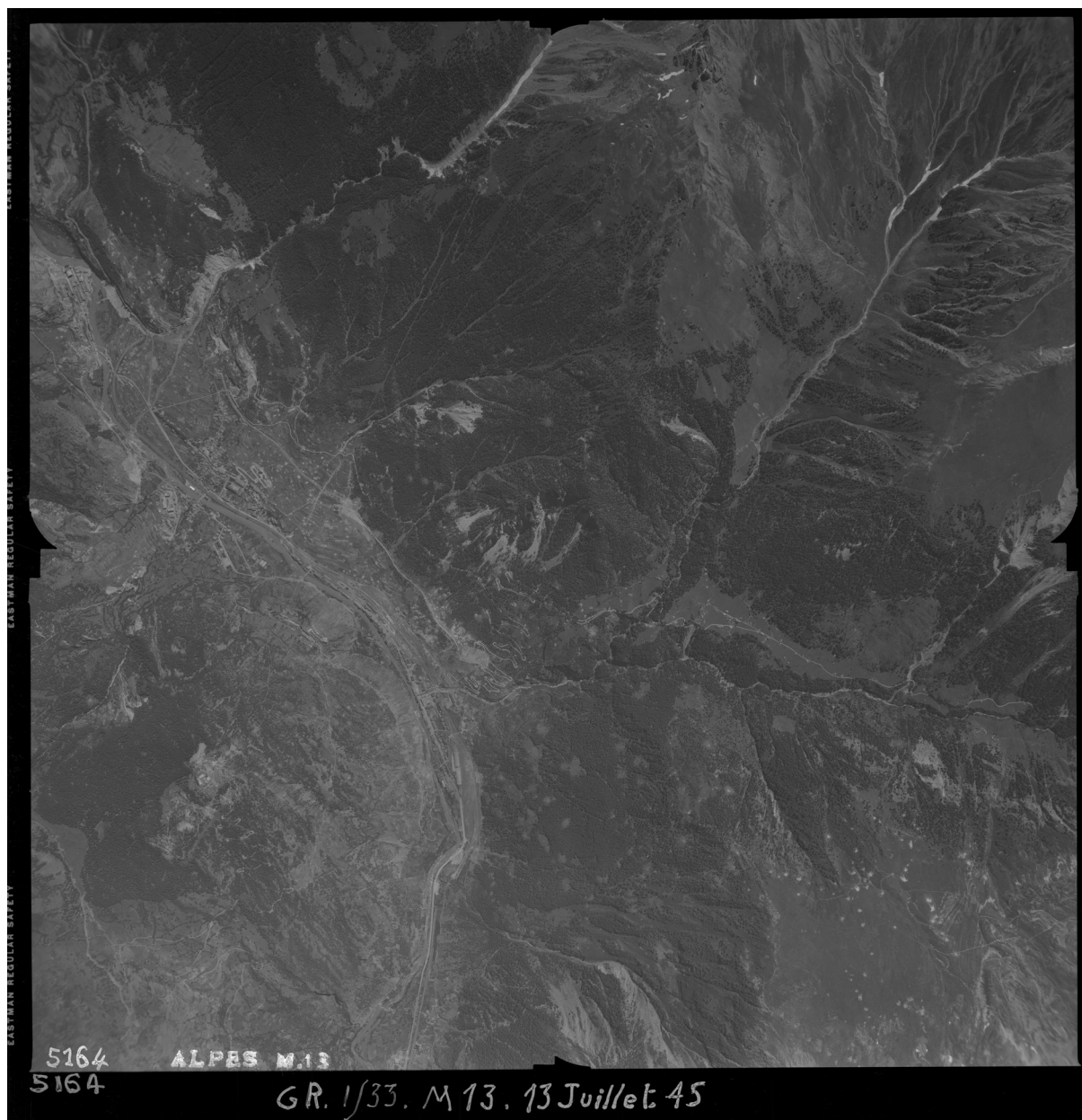
Bennett, L. (2011)

The fortification, standing alone in the mountainous landscape, is an immediate reminder of the history of the area., It acts alone as a material witness to the anxieties, fear and anger brought on by the war (Bennett, L. 2011).

Today, most of the builders and soldiers who lived in these structures have disappeared, and the war that defined their construction is a distant memory. It gives the opportunity to rediscover the Alpine bunker as a curiosity in the vastness of the mountainous landscape. From as early as in the XVI's century, it is perceived as a wild environment, a grandiose even healing nature. Even if, over the centuries, the human approach to the mountains has greatly evolved, from a realm of the gods, dangerous and sublime in its grandeur, to a tourist economy focused on sports. One constant aspect is the search for a feeling of grandeur, discovery and fear, encapsulated within the 'sublime'.

What place, then, does the bunker have in this quest for the sublime, in this race for landscapes and physical performance?

As defined by Whelan and Moore (2016) in their book *Heritage, Memory and the Politics of Identity* New perspectives on the Cultural Landscape, the modern definition of Landscape is: «'spaces' or 'places' that exist reflexively in our cognitive as well as our corporeal experiences of the material world (...).A product of mindscape (...))» (p. 4). Meaning that our understanding of a landscape is intrinsically linked to what we can perceive of it. Thus, if one spots the bunker structure on the side of the cliff, their conception of the Alpine territory take a turn. The valleys, rocks and faults observed are transformed into a camp, shell holes, ruined barracks and anti-tank fault. This new ensemble can only be given meaning by the explicit sight of a military architecture as strong as the bunker and its armed blocks.



A scared landscape, where the only evidence of this suffering can be seen today in the military relics still standing, such as the Alpine fortifications and their material memory.

Fig 46\_ Analogue aerial photograph, Modane Valley 13/07/45. IGN-2024 <https://remonterletemps.ign.fr/>

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Narrative suggesting the potential for the Alpine Bunker to stand as point de départ pour raise the collective interest in Alpine Battle of WWII thanks to the environment it settles in.

Interview extract with a fortification enthusiast and Youtuber, Les Historateurs\_

« L- Do you have a favourite work?

A- Yes, the Lavoir, because of its magnificent setting. As it's an Alpine fortification, the setting is still very impressive. You can imagine all the work that went into it, how it was built and so on. And for the videos we make, the landscape helps to keep viewers interested.(...) On top of that, thanks to the generally long military presence in these works, they were kept in good condition for longer. »

The Maginot fortification operates as a network. It is a punctual cultural ensemble marking a border that no longer exists, or at least that has shifted. Permanently fixed in a timeless landscape whose culture is not determined by a nationality but by an environment. The structures exist in spite of distinctions, origins and cultures; it stands as a result of war and political or diplomatic negotiations (Zatta, F. 2017). It stands as a reminder of local sufferings and national-international defeat in the face of the IIIrd Reich. Today, amidst the general oblivion of this particular context, in the durability of its materiality, the bunker suddenly seems fragile when faced with the longevity of its environment. Open in neat cracks, filled with rusty memories and decaying materials, it is a living witness to the entropy that affects every being and every system. It is a well known state of architectural decay surrounded by a seemingly unchanging environment.

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Through this, Bennett expressed the characteristics of the bunker's materiality correlated with the aim of the structure. Protection against powerful forces (physical and political)

« Stubborn endurance is their Raison d'Être »  
(Bennett, L. 2020)

The accelerated entropy depicted within the bunker confronts our own longevity and that of the society in which we live. Seeing the process of ruination, supposedly due to the effects of time and climate alone, is destabilising and can be comfortable (Manning, P. 2017). As it relates to our own temporality and that of our society. Built to supposedly withstand violent attacks, the ageing and visible entropy of the structures evokes individual sentimentality through the reminding of the collective memory of a conflict (Bicknell, J. et. al. 2019). In the case of the Alpine bunkers, given the lack of information about the context surrounding them, their mysterious presence points to a vision of entropy & the ecological impact of Mankind as a society.

Along this field trip, walking to the fortifications and entering various structures such as observation points, settlements, outposts, etc. I was able to discover the different layers of material memories encapsulated in the structures. Scarred by bullets or deformed by explosions, written over by generations of soldiers and curious visitors. It's defensive, enclosed



appearance, unfolding and overlapping testimonies of the past affects the collective imagination. The WWII Alpine Bunkers are impersonating the weakness of a nation (Garrett, B. & Klinke, I. 2019). Left to the elements and isolated, these memorials appear to denature and depower the symbol holding on the bunker (Bennett, L. 2020).

A marker in the landscape, the fortification can be seen as a 'time capsule' or as DeSilvey C. (2017) explains in her book *Curated Decay*, as «a vessel of sorts, holding material memories of (...) past in this place» (p.2). Open to all, the interior reveals graffiti, murals, objects and footprints (human & non human, recent & past). A collection of traces telling the story of the diverse inhabitants of the fortification.

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Showing in what ways the environment impact the fortification in a good way for preservation of memory.

Interview extract with a fortification enthusiast and Youtuber, Les Historateurs\_

« These fortifications are difficult to access, (...). And with the added bonus of altitude, it's very well preserved! As for the Maurienne fortifications, this is a very special area because there is a high concentration of them (...) thanks to its continuous border with Italy, and they are generally well preserved. In the north they are not so well preserved because of the scorched earth policy systematically applied by German troops. »

Encountering the decayed furnishings, vats and latrines, it is easy to imagine a place where people lived. The engravings on the walls, carved with the end of a stick or a knife, names, dates, convictions, anecdotes and jokes. The bunker is marked by the memories of past visitors.

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Comments of visitors of Saint Gobain Museum in Maurienne. The bunker is open and explained. Seeing the traces of time on the structure opens the door to the imagination and encourages us to project ourselves into the past and the lives of the soldiers of the time.

Interview extract with a member of the association 'Musée de la traversée des Alpes'\_

« M- People like it here because it's a bit old fashioned, it's in good condition but you can still see the rust and seepage, so people say it feels more 'real'. (...) it's more authentic (...).»

No longer in use for decades, the Bunker Maginot, abandoned after the battles, is a World War II sanctuary. Initially rejected because of its military aspect, which was a reminder of painful events. Today, its presence reveals a larger group of remains in the landscape. Its envelope can be read in the manner of a time capsule, engraved with the names of its inhabitants and exhibiting furniture in the manner of a museum.

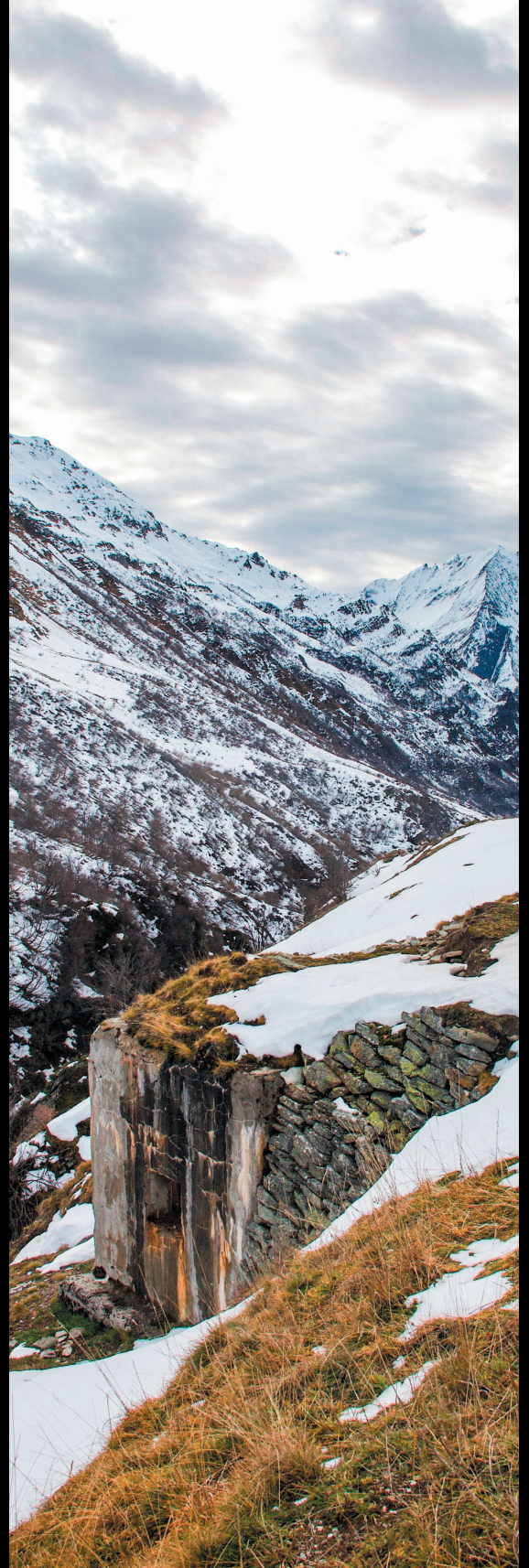
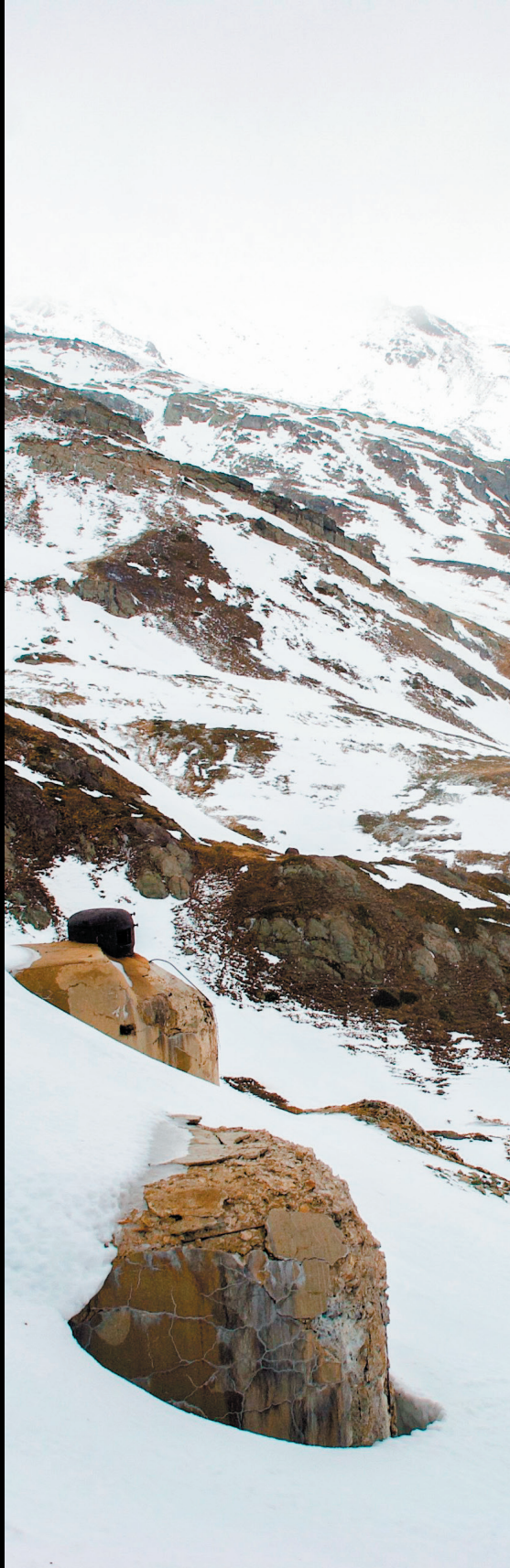




Fig 47\_Double Exposure Photograph inside/outside Saint-Gobain Fort, By Author (2023).



# Landmark







*Marked Land*



# Time Capsule









# Shelter

*In shadows deep, a fortress stands,  
Concrete guardian, crafted by hands.  
A shelter once, in battles grim,  
A refuge firm, for souls within.*

*Now echoes linger, whispers say,  
Nature claims its due, finds its way.  
A bunker's shell, a haven new,  
Where flora blooms and creatures strew.*

*Silent witness, through time it's passed,  
A shelter transformed, a role recast.*

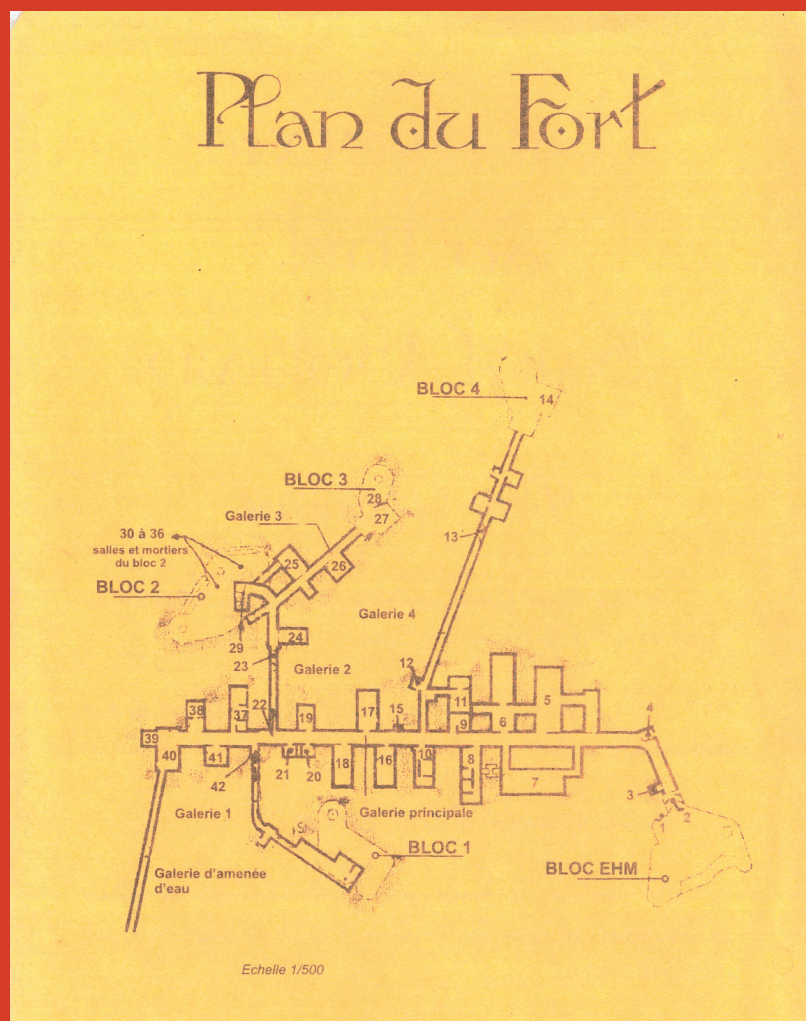


Fig. 60\_Plan, Saint-Gobain structure. Museum flyer, Musée de la Traversée des Alpes (2023)

## Surprising Inhabitants

Built as a protective shell against bombing, buried under metres of ground, with few openings and framed by thick reinforced concrete walls, the bunker stands as a dwelling typology. In this inverted construction, where the walls are thicker than the space they contain (Bennett, L. 2011), troops were housed in total autonomy for several weeks. could survive up to a 3-month siege in total autonomy in the case of Saint Gobain, with a garrison of around 80 soldiers. All elementary rooms and more were implemented in the plans : private and communal dormitories, toilets, kitchens, medical center and even offices in the bigger works. Even for smaller structures such as Les Rochilles or Seloges, dormitories and latrines were provided to ensure a sane environment, enabling the physical comfort of sheltering and everyday functionality as any architectural building (Jelić, A., Tieri, G., De Matteis, F., Babiloni, F., & Vecchiato, G. 2016).

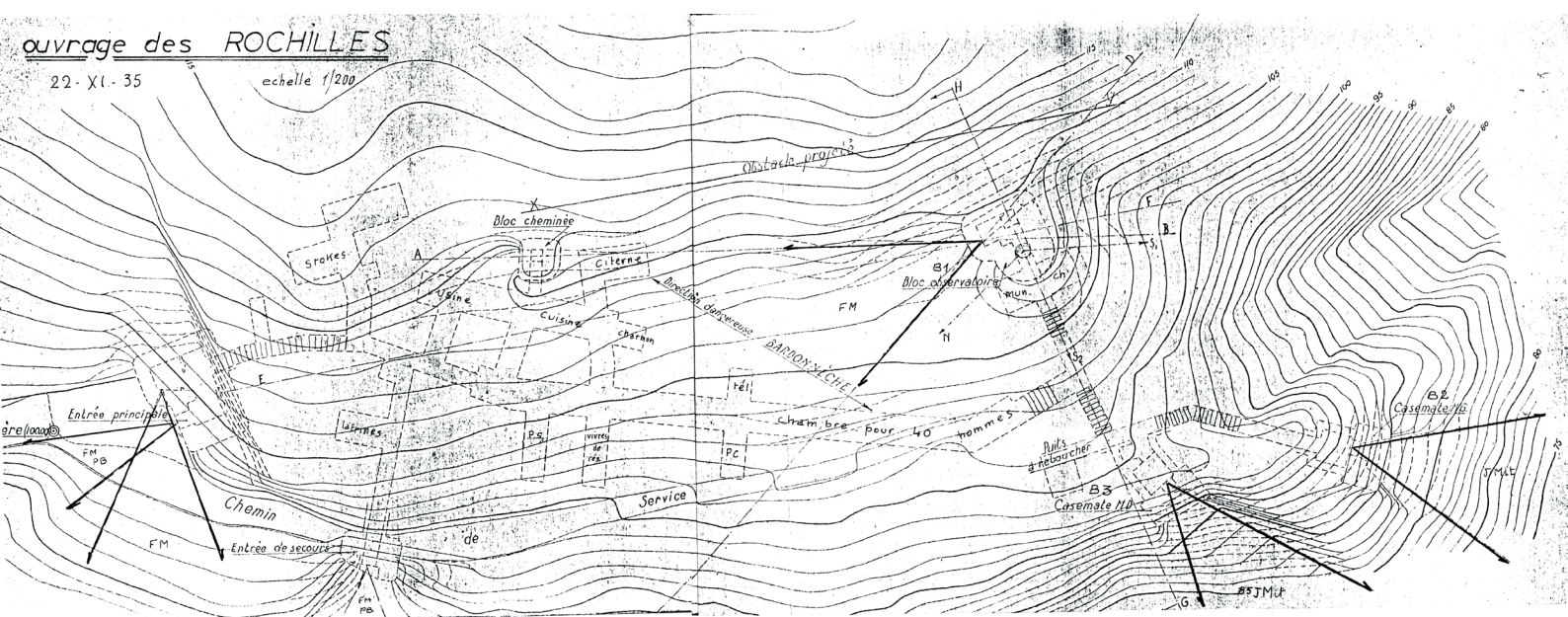


Fig 70 \_Plan 1/200, Les Rochilles structure. Wikimaginot (retrieved in 2023)

However, this environment is tinged with the violence of war and the rudimentary lifestyle of the armies. The Bunker typology is printed in the collective mind as a place of destruction. A deadly weapon and a protective shell, an isolating booth characterised by very few openings, essentially observation and firing openings. Left exposed to the elements, on the edge of society, numerous animals and plants can now be found wandering and growing through the structure. It is the perfect place for the proliferation of all kinds of mould and insects.

### « A more than human enculturing the bunker »

Benett L. (2020) The Bunker's After-Life: Cultural Production in the Ruins of the Cold War.

The accumulation of animal and vegetal traces show the bunker in a new light : a shelter for biodiversity. Which surprisingly enough, proliferates in a place designed to be a hermetic complex, protective from the outside (Benett L. 2020). Shrubs and grasses grow in the smallest gaps. Faeces, cobwebs and nesting remains are visible throughout the underground complex. These new inhabitants make the fortification toxic and hostile to humans, for whom it was designed (Benett L. 2020). In fact, with organisms such as mould or fungi, and the weakening of the structure by the growth of plants in the cracks, the abandoned military works are a health and physical hazard for humans. Bennett L. (2020) defines the bunker as a hostile and habitable place, neither fully alive nor fully dead, as humans are simply curious temporary visitors and the new inhabitants would not be considered in the architectural debate.

« Biological and ecological concepts of decay are full of activity, exchange, acquisition and redistribution. Decay is life-giving as it is life-taking »

Jane M. Jacobs & Stephen Cairns (seen in Curated Decay)

Left behind by humans, another life invested the dwelling, revealing a new aesthetic of abandonment and neglect within which life flourishes in an interaction of the natural and the artifactual (Bicknell, J., Judkins, J., & Korsmeyer, C. (Eds.). 2019). As Manning P. expresses it in his book 'No Ruins. No Ghosts.', the processes of nature investing the space of the hermetic bunker, 'Breathing Life' to the fortification. As the structure ages and transforms through the acts of climate, opportunities of new growth arise from these conditions. The bunker transcends its purpose, evolving into a dynamic ecosystem where life thrives amidst decay. Microorganisms and enzymes catalyse the decomposition of the building, rendering it toxic to humans. The nutrients released through these processes create a fertile and habitable space for other living things (DeSilvey C. 2017). It is in this interplay of growth and decay that a new symbol is revealed through the bunker—not as monuments to a past conflict, but as a testament of a quieter story of resilience.

As I ventured into various fortifications during my study trip, I found myself captivated by the bunker's evolution as a living space. Amidst the crumbling furniture, machinery, and utensils left behind by soldiers long gone, there was a palpable sense of history lingering in the air. But what struck me most was the contrast between past and present: while the feeling of the past human activity left a void, the small hints of a different kind of life filled the space as a poignant testament to the transformation from a survival machine to a living ecosystem, where life continues to thrive amidst the echoes of past conflicts.



Entering different fortifications as part of my study trip, three aspects of the bunker as 'living space' are identifiable. The remains of furniture, machinery and utensils for human use are evidence of the bunker's dwelling role, but 80 years after the Second World War, these spaces are now occupied by flora and fauna.



Fig 71\_Double Exposure Photograph inside Seloge, By Author (2023).



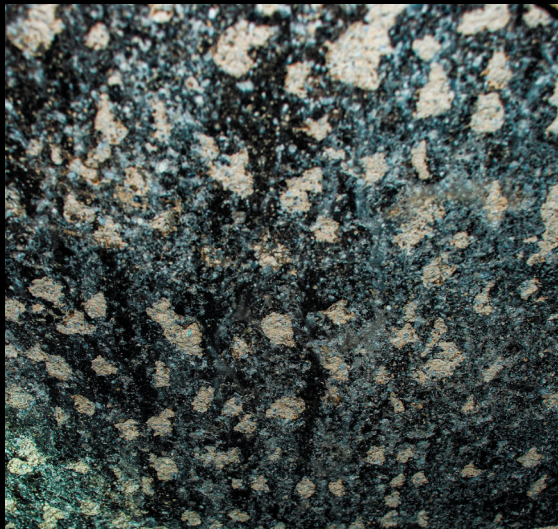
Refuge





Fig 72-78\_Photographs Field Trip November 2023, By Author (2023).





Shrubs - mould - algae

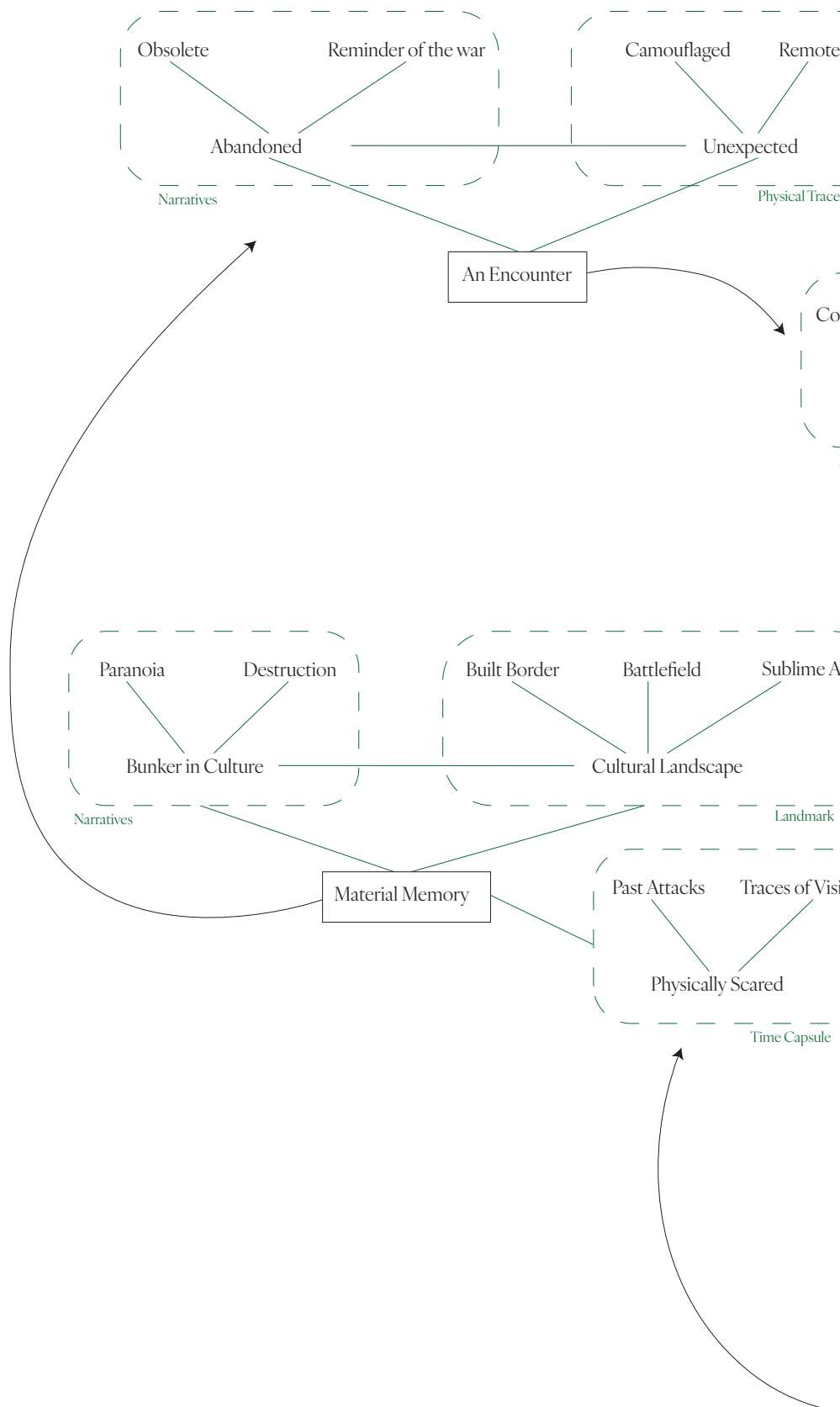
# Flora





Birds - spiders - moth

# Fauna





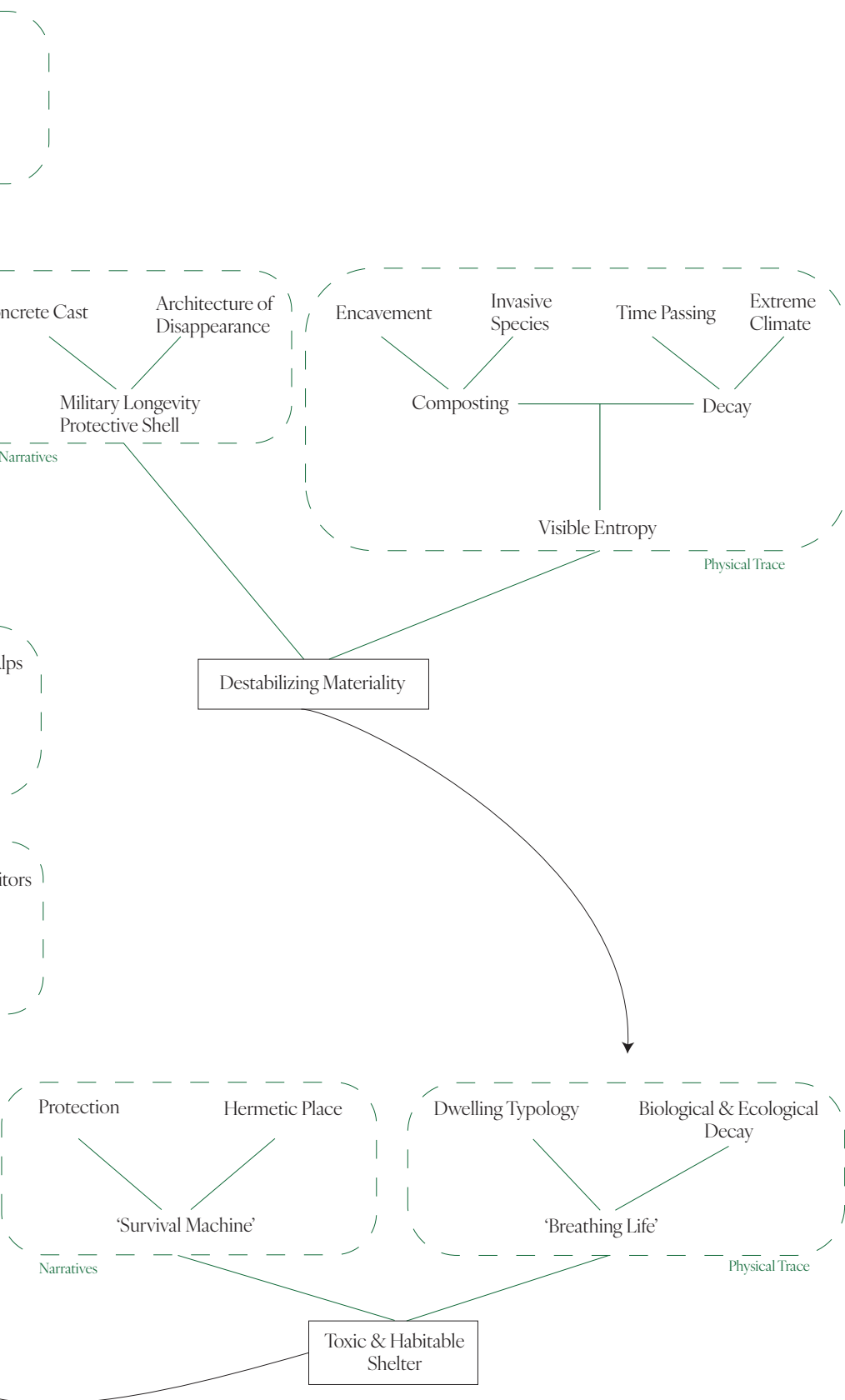


Fig 87\_Diagram of research, By Author (2023).

## Conclusion

My research into the various narratives linked to the French alpine fortifications of the Second World War and a trip to the Maurienne, a region with a rich military history, immersed me in an almost forgotten world. This world is sustained by a few committed individuals and weary structures, in the blindspot of our societies.

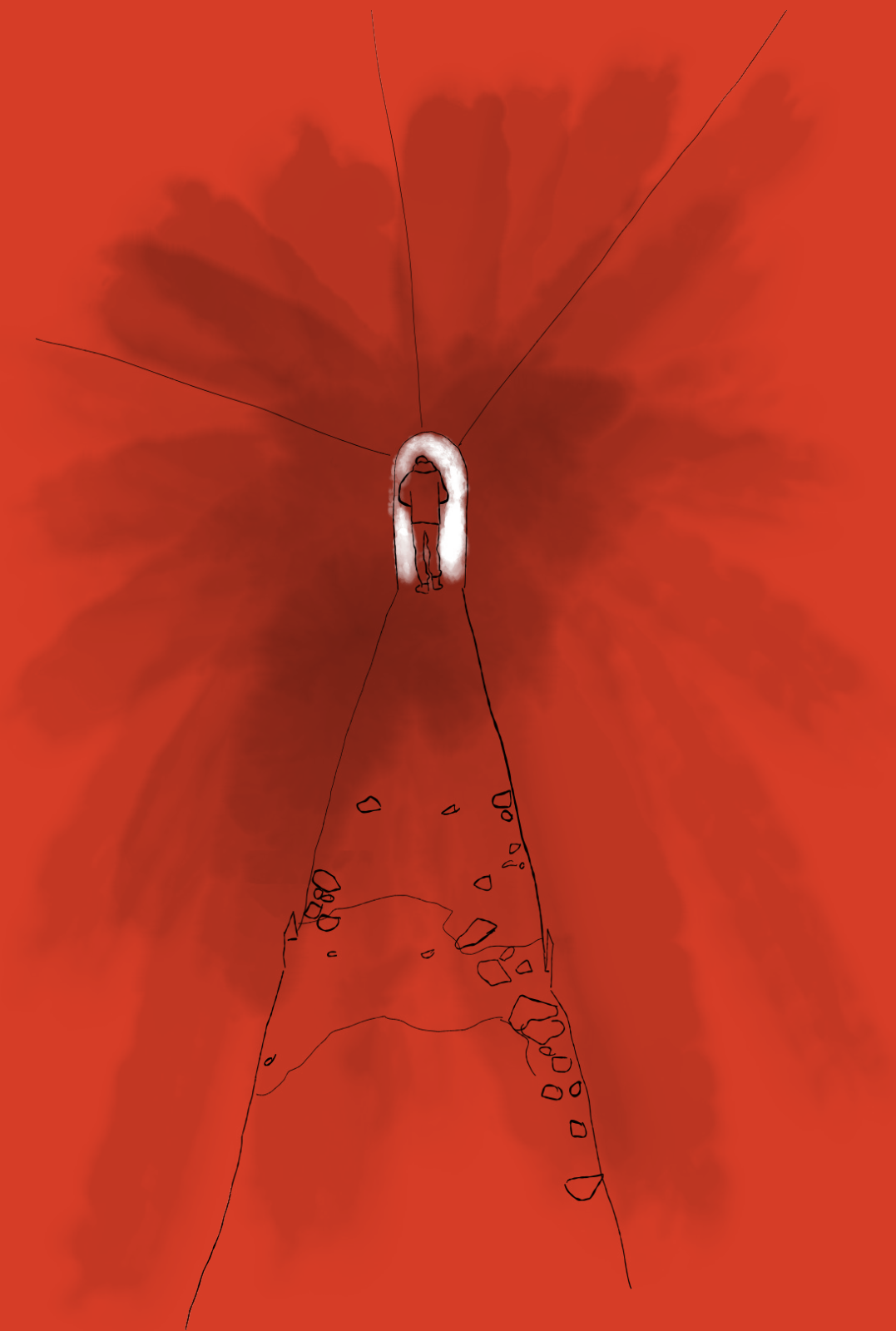
As I explored these fortifications, each unique but with similar aspects, I encountered a range of emotions - from the excitement of discovery to the anxiety of decay and the weight of memory. These structures, originally built for defence, have evolved over the decades. They have gone from neglected ruins to unexpected sites of curiosity and wonder. Meeting local residents and enthusiasts, I was struck by the mixed feelings of indifference and awe that these bunkers evoke. The physical decay of these structures, as nature imposes its space, reflects our collective struggle with memory and identity. The transition from military stronghold to habitat for plants and animals symbolises the cyclical nature of life and the passage of time.

This study has given me a deeper understanding of how these war heritage sites serve as tangible markers of history. They are not only relics of conflict, but also reflections of human impermanence and the reclaiming touch of nature. The Alpine bunkers stand as silent witnesses to past struggles, encapsulating memories and inviting a broader reflection on our approach to dealing with a heavy past embodied in architecture. Unveiling the heritage of these fortifications has important political, socio-cultural and educational implications.

In pointing out that these structures were deliberately forgotten, both on the part of individuals and on the part of the state in charge of their upbringing. A cultural centre project provides an opportunity to question the maintenance of collective memory by the state, which projects its desire for a unified and proud nation at the expense of knowledge. The manipulation of memory by a power-based unity can have dangerous consequences, sometimes leading to history repeating itself, with the rise of extreme parties illustrating the lack of openness and fear of citizens. This is driven by a lack of understanding of the complex social and political dynamics arising from our collective past, which is amputated and forms the basis of the individual identity on which collective decisions are made.

Through this research, I have come to appreciate the deep connection between these fortifications and the stories they hold, reminding us of a difficult war and its lasting heritage. Leading this project to create a living, dynamic space where history, community, and nature intertwine, offering a deeper engagement with the past and present of the Alpine region.





Unfolding

Les Rochilles

Unfolding

Les Rochilles

Unfolding

Les Rochilles

Unfolding

Les Rochilles



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During the field trip I had the opportunity to visit twelve structures of different sizes, at different altitudes and more or less integrated into human systems. Some had been converted into museums, others had been built in another century and were part of a government heritage programme, such as the Ezeillon fort and the Saint Gobain Maginot bunker.

During the interviews it became clear that my ignorance of the existence of these bunkers was a general social unawareness. Whether local or not, whether young or over 80, whether in the field of history or not, their existence is largely forgotten and unrecognised.

How can we recover this knowledge? what can we recover? how can architecture do this?

My first bunker experience was with the Les Rochilles structure, located in a particularly isolated valley, popular with hikers in all seasons and rich in border history, still visible today. This particular location suggested the possibility of a project to enhance the heritage of Alpine fortifications.





Fig 88\_ Les Rochilles Bunker, By Author (2024)



Amodon



Marie-Christine



Replaton



Saint-Antoine

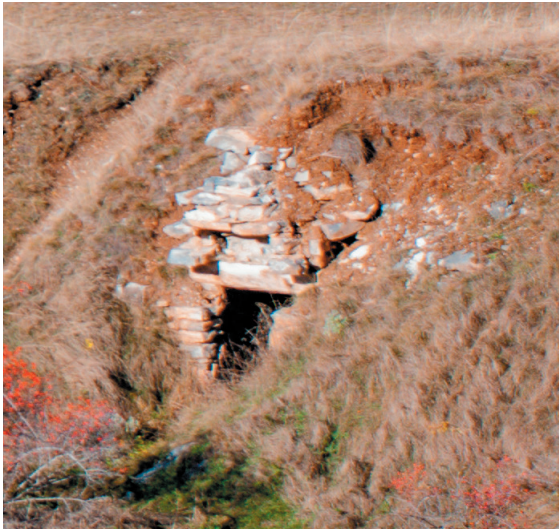


Seloges



Rochilles





Charles-Albert



Maison Penchée



Sapey



Charles-Félix



Victor-Emmanuel



Saint-Gobain

The bunker is accessible through a network of hiking trails, making the journey itself an integral part of the experience. Hiking, as a leisure activity, encourages introspection and observation, allowing visitors to connect more deeply with their surroundings. This path, designed for all-season access (albeit with a longer route in winter due to road closures), winds through a region prized for cycling, climbing, and skiing.

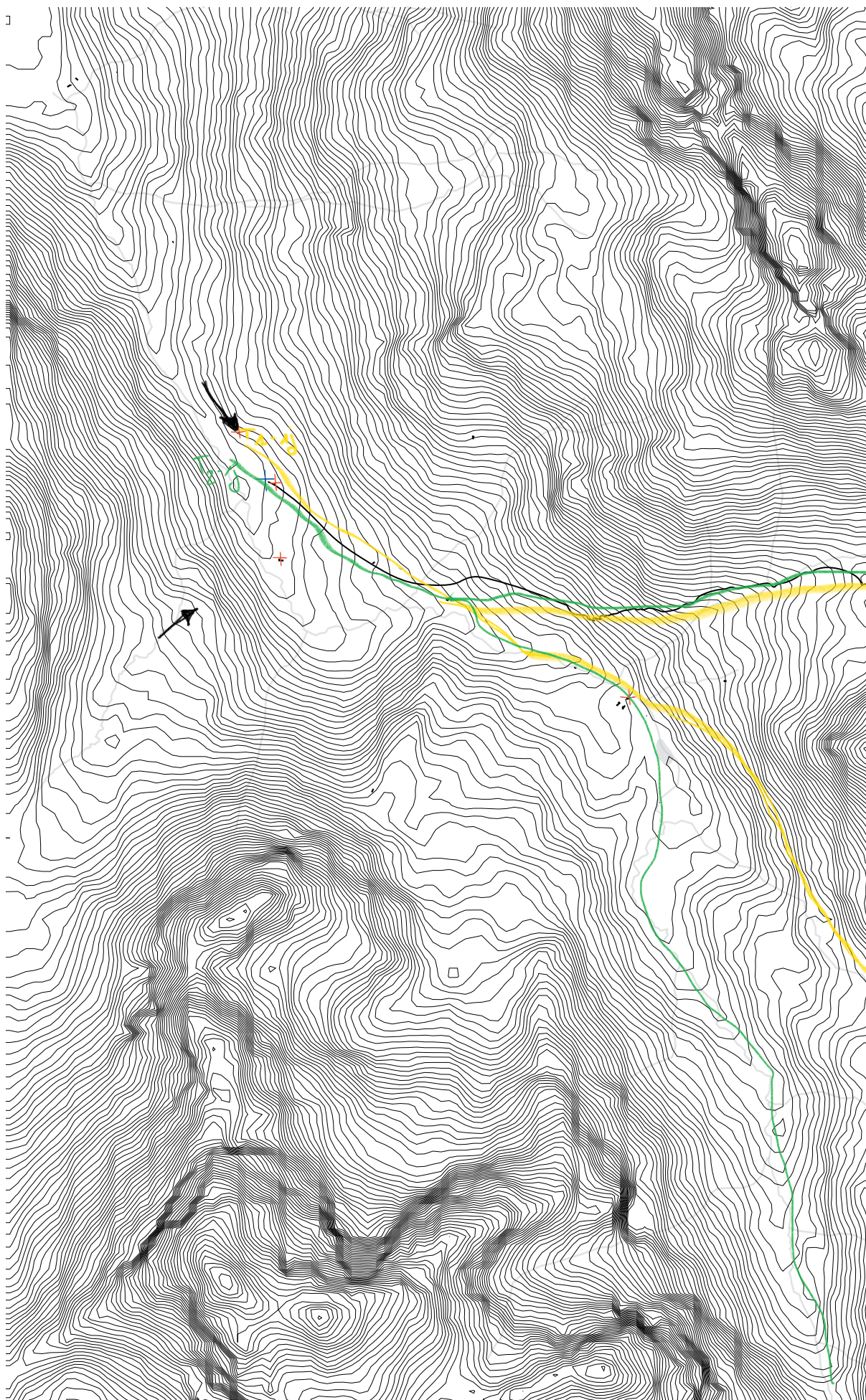
The variety of routes, from short walks to multi-day excursions with overnight stays in nearby refuges, offers different levels of challenge and commitment, and walkers will encounter a rich biodiversity along the way, with cliffs and high altitudes supporting unique plant and animal life. The trail also reveals layers of military history, from old camps to scattered remains on the slopes.

This landscape, dotted with historical markers, culminates at the bunker near the Plateau des Rochilles, surrounded by three tranquil lakes. The physical challenge of the walk mirrors the challenge of remembering and engaging with our past. It turns the journey into a pilgrimage where every step reflects the effort to connect with history. This trail offers a blend of physical exertion and introspection, making the experience of reaching the bunker truly special.





















# Senses of Place

The Maurienne region is deeply rooted in its alpine identity, especially evident in its architectural style. Here, wood and stone, sourced directly from local quarries and industries, form the foundation of the region's vernacular architecture. The landscape is dotted with small hamlets of houses, barns, and chapels, each sporting steeply sloped roofs to manage the heavy snowfall that characterizes certain seasons. This vernacular charm defines the surrounding villages and speaks to a tradition of craftsmanship and adaptation to the mountain environment.

It's with these vernacular aspects in mind, which also address concerns about the ecological footprint of the project in terms of material transportation, accessibility, and recycling, that the cultural center was conceived. The roofs' slope not only serves a practical purpose in dealing with winter snow but also honors traditional building techniques. Dry stone walls and wooden elements, hallmarks of the local vernacular architecture, aid in seamlessly integrating the construction into its natural surroundings, fostering a connection with the ecosystem. Through the use of dry stone walls, the project not only constructs a building but provides opportunities for biodiversity to thrive in various places.

The bunker, serving as the genesis of thought for this project, stands as a timeless element in the landscape. Serving as a reference point for the passage of time and a visual reminder of darker periods in our society's history, it anchors the cultural center in a narrative of resilience. The cultural path visually connects to this structure of the past and, drawing upon its decaying materiality visible in the opened concrete cracks, positions the human body around it to re-establish connections to this faded past. Thus, the project aims not only to enrich collective knowledge about its own identity but also to engage in a visual dialogue between architecture, the remnants of the bunker, and the surrounding cliffs, reflecting the rich cultural, historical, and environmental context of the region. In designing this project, these elements are not merely preserved but celebrated, weaving imperfections into a narrative of resilience. This thoughtful approach respects the site's historical significance and environmental uniqueness, resulting in a space that feels both timeless and deeply connected to its surroundings.





Fig 101\_Photographs Fiel Trip November 2023, By Author (2023).



# Velnaacular

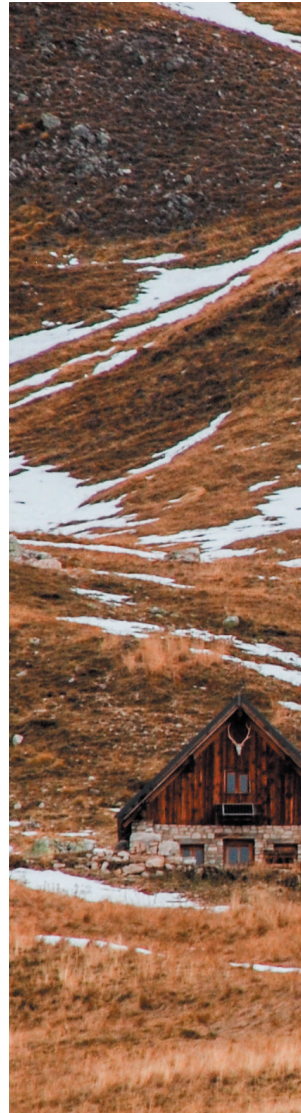
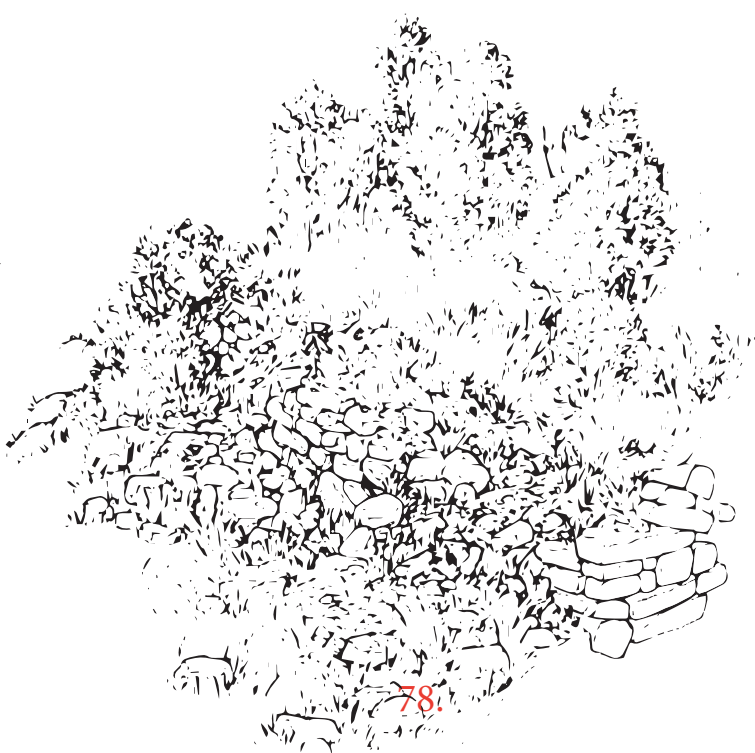
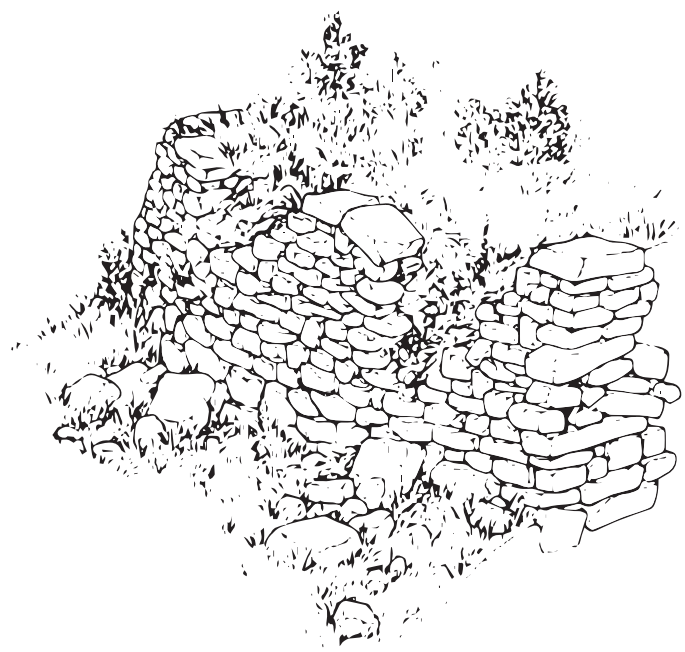
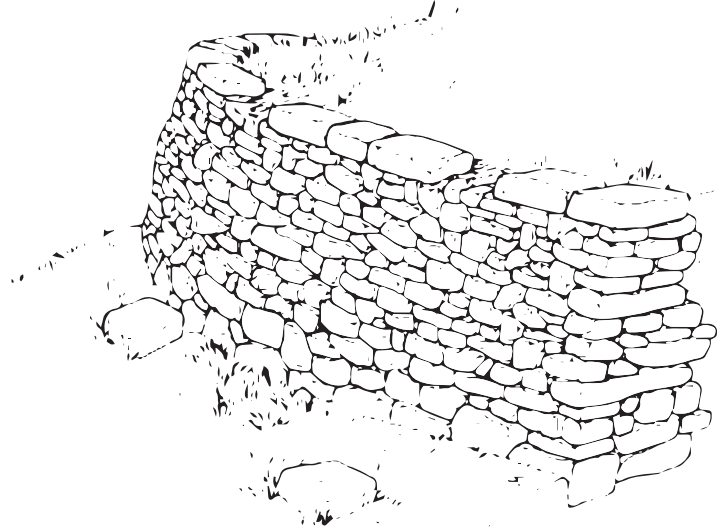






Fig 102-104\_Photographs Fiel Trip November 2023, By Author (2023).



Scale of Time  
↓



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Cultural landscape describes a «portion of the earth's surface designed and used by humans» (Jäger, 1987, p.1)

Dry stone walls are a recurring feature in this valley, using the abundant, strong stones provided by the surrounding peaks. This method of construction is consistent with considerations of time, biodiversity and the afterlife of architecture, all central themes in my research on Alpine fortifications. Like bunkers, dry stone walls shape and create cultural landscapes, combining natural development with sustainable construction. The mineral nature of the stones supports ecosystems at different scales, providing habitats for plants and animals. This technique uses locally available materials, without cement, and relies on the simple act of stacking stones.

### «Dry stone walling is a gentle construction»

Ingrid Schegk, Bätzing, W. (2019) p.45

These walls, like alpine fortifications, endure over time and interact with their environment, creating new shelters and landscapes through their natural decay.

The use of dry stone walls for a durable structure has the potential to resonate with the history of bunkers through its similarities and minimal construction impact.

The wall walks the fell -  
Grey millipede on slow  
Stone hooves;  
Its slack back hollowed  
At sulleys and grooves,  
Or shouldering over  
Old boulders  
Too big to be rolled away.  
Fallen fragments  
Of the high crags  
Crawl in the walk of the wall.  
A dry-stone wall  
Is a wall and a wall  
Leaning together  
Greening and weathering,  
Flank by flank,  
With filling of rubble  
Between the two -  
A double-rank  
Stone dyke:  
Flags and through-  
stones jutting out sideways  
Like the steps of a stile.  
A wall walks slowly.  
At each give of the ground,  
Each creak of the rock's ribs,  
It puts its foot gingerly,  
Arches its hog-holes,  
Lets cobble and knee-joint  
Settle and grip.  
As the slipping fellside  
Erodes and drifts,  
The wall shifts with it,  
Is always on the move  
They built a wall slowly,  
A day a week;  
Built it to stand,  
But not stand still.  
They built a wall to walk.

«Wall,» by Norman Nicholson (1914-1987)170





Stones hosting the living on site



Fig 106-III\_Photographs Fiel Trip November 2023, By Author (2023).









Fig. 112. Photomontage. By Author (2023).



# Movements

On entering the bunker, it's striking to see the coexistence of ancient and recent human traces and animal tracks in this subterranean environment. The Alps, with their unique and fragile ecosystem, host different populations of animals and plants at different altitudes, each adapted to the specific conditions associated with elevation. Some species migrate between the heights as the seasons change in search of optimal temperatures and specific foods. Today, humans are more transient visitors to the mountains, and their dwellings are designed for the consistent comfort found in lower valleys - stable temperature conditions and protection from the elements. Therefore, the creation of a project at high altitude (2500m) requires careful consideration of its impact on the ecosystem.

A thorough analysis of the local fauna and flora is essential to understand their movement patterns, potential disturbance and shelter requirements. This analysis will inform the design to ensure minimal disruption to the ecosystem. Understanding the habits and migration patterns of wildlife helps to design structures and trails that harmonise with the environment rather than disrupt it. In mountainous regions, especially in busy areas, human presence must be carefully managed to protect the fragile ecosystem. This management includes the creation of designated paths, parking areas and educational signage on proper conduct in the mountains. Analysis of human movements is essential to ensure that the project location and design facilitate coexistence with the environment. The project site will be largely determined by this analysis of human and wildlife movement patterns.

In addition to the movement of living beings, other types of movement must be taken into account to ensure the safety of the structure and its harmonious integration with the bunker. These include geological movements, such as rocks falling from cliffs, which pose significant risks. The design must take these hazards into account to ensure both the safety and longevity of the structure.

The flow of water is another critical factor. The proximity of lakes and the way rainwater flows down the mountain must be analysed to understand where water will accumulate and how it can be managed or used. This analysis helps prevent water-related damage and can inform sustainable water use strategies for the project.

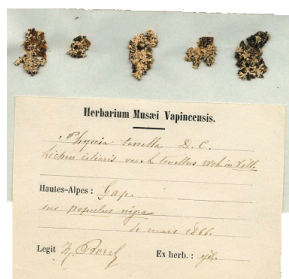
By considering the movements of people, animals, rock and water, the design process can create a structure that respects and integrates with its environment.

This will allow the development of a programme that is well suited to the site, honouring the anthropological significance of the site while providing a resilient, low impact architecture. By incorporating pathways and spaces that facilitate safe and sustainable human interaction with the ecosystem, while providing new habitats and minimising disruption to local wildlife. The final design will reflect a deep understanding of these dynamic movements, creating a harmonious and resilient addition to the alpine landscape.





Fig 113\_Photographs Fiel Trip November 2023, By Author (2023).

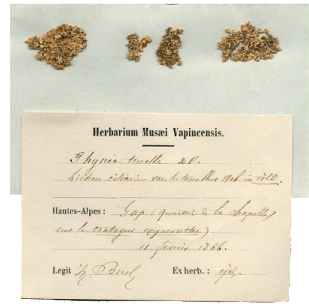


## Les Rochilles Pass

## Gran Ban Lake







Les Cerces Lake



Round lake

Ouvrage Les Rochilles













## Interviews

18/11\_On the way back from Les Rochilles\_ A group of 4 people, 60-50 y.o 2F 2M

L- If I tell you 'Fortifications of the Maginot Line from the Second World War', do you imagine those structures in the Maurienne region, in the valleys and mountains ?

M1- Well yes, there is the 'Camp des Rochilles' up there, and its bunker above the Ceres Lake. We visited it already but not all together.(as a group)

L- What brought you to enter the bunker of the Rochilles ?

M2- We were hiking over there around the lakes and we overruled the holes in the cliff and out of curiosity we went to have a look.

F1- We went inside but not too far in the galleries as it is very dark. I am really interested in visiting this kind of construction work, I don't know why, it's pure curiosity. We also went to the ones in Normandie.

M2- But for the Maginot Line fortifications...

F2- I am not sure if there is any around here, it is more towards Alsace no ? (In the North-East)

L- Actually the construction works in the region are also part of the Maginot Line, it was built all the way down to Corsica along the boarder !

M1- Oh really ? We learned something today then! We also know the Fort of the Télégraphe, but I feel like it is older isn't it ? As well as the fort of Esseillon.

L- Yes they are older constructions but were invested by the army during World War II. Here is my last question, as I am a student in architecture, I am interested in the future of the fortifications. In regard to that, would you have any suggestions, wishes, expectations or ideas on what could become of them ?

F1- Well, we wouldn't want to move in there that's for sure haha !

M1- Ouf it's a difficult question, I don't really know.

L- Well anything, maybe restaure it, showcase it, indicate its presence in some sort, tell it's history ...

M1- Ah yes that might be great to showcase it a bit, at least marking out its presence with some explanatory signs.

F2- Like creating a sort of GR you know ? With a hiking track that would connect all the structures together

F1- It would tell a bit of the history of 'why they are here', it could bring some tourism !!

Geneviève- Yes that's a nice idea, a bit like what they did on the Glières Plateau if you know it ?

M1- Yes a little, but over there it really is a memorial site/landscape... People go there to collect themselves whereas here it's a bit different...



### 18/11\_ Discussion with my father, Alain, on the way up to Les Rochilles

L- When you did the military Service, you told me you were in the BCA (Bataillon des Chasseurs Alpains), what exactly was your role then ?

A- Yes, I was driving the army trucks

L- You told me that during service you once stayed for the night in an abandoned bunker, what were the conditions like ?

A- I think it was before the BCA during the Classes. We slept in the 'Fort de la Platte', not 'Fort du Truc' as it was used by a farmer, to shelter livestock. It is the same now for la Platte. We hiked up there and they just told us « Get your sleeping bag ! And you, you start with the first watch! » So we did, it was all damp and dark. I think it was simply to impress us, the new recruits.

L- You told me you walk in the region close to the Rochilles once with clients, to the passes around. When you did so, do you care to tell the history of the region and show the remains (like the 'Camp des Rochilles)?

A- Well at the time I didn't know about the little Maginot Line yet. I only found out about it two years ago, then I thought the Maginot Line stopped further North, before the border with Switzerland. I read about it in an article in the Guides Magazine on the 'Little Maginot Line', and that's how I found out about it.

### 21/11\_ Call with Laurent Demouzon, Historian

L- I'm interested in the impact of perception on the Maginot Line fortifications in the Alps. I'm looking at the same time at the history of the constructions as well as their symbolisation.

LD- Abandonment.. I don't really know that well the After War period, but I think that most of them were still maintained during the Cold War, for the most important ones except Saint-Gobain. This one was used as an ammunition dump. Then, with the development of new weaponry and the evolution of the threats, the structures have been abandoned by the army. Could they be restored today? I don't really know. The French strategy had changed, so the buildings were no longer needed, especially given their location and accessibility problems. The strategy now is nuclear, aviation and mobile armies, so fortifications are no longer relevant. What's more, neither Italy nor Germany is a threat nowadays, or at least that would be surprising. So the only real reason to refurbish them today would be as a museum, but for whom? for what? and which administration? Because the administration, whether public or military, couldn't care less. Memory is political now and they don't want us to remember this part of history.

L- When did you start finding interest in this part of history ?

LD- I was born in '62, so in 1990, a little before the army. Two years before that I discovered fortifications and I wanted to find out more, so I read a lot. I was only in the army for a year, you know, I'm not in the military myself. After the army I continued to be interested in fortifications and, above all, I wanted to tell the story of the men in the fortifications. So there's a bit of history of fortifications, equipment etc, but I'm mainly looking for testimonies and period photographs.

For the testimonials, you have to find the people, so that's more complicated. I went to

see the archives at Vincennes to research, there are plans, details of buildings, personnel and operations, that's it. For the Photographs, taking pictures weren't allowed during the war, so the ones that exist are from private collections and those taken on the Italian side. Those days I've been spending all my time on websites reselling historical photos looking for engravings in Seloges. A communist battalion had been placed there after the war as they didn't really know what to do with them. If you've seen any BRI engravings or communist signs it's them.

**L- I imagine you visited some of the fortifications of the Maginot Line in the Alps, what were your impression during the visits ?**

LD- Well yes I visited some but you know once you've seen one you've seen them all... So I only check a structure once, to see the engravings and all but I never come back as there is no new testimonies on the walls... For exemple, in Seloges last time I went was 30 years ago. I am only looking for graffitis of soldiers, those are real testimonies.

**L- What do you think these fortifications could become in the future ?**

LD- They are being abandoned and will stay abandoned. It's very difficult and expensive to restore. The authorities don't care, and the army even less. And with the level of humidity in these things, it's almost impossible to restore them, so it's not worth it. Plus, I don't know if you've noticed, but access! Access is really complicated. People always ask me: « Laurent, why don't you go and see more structures? » I'm telling you, access is difficult and sometimes even dangerous. For the most part, access is closed for more than half the year: from September to June it's impossible to get there because of the snow and closed roads. So it's the associations that take care of the fortifications. Here we have the Saint Gobain structure, which is well placed as it is in the valley, but it's complicated to make it accessible to visitors, you know. The association has to pay to refurbish it and then afterwards to show it to visitors. I know how it is, I manage the Telegraphe fort. We're not open all year round, and in the summer we struggle to get visitors in - we get maybe 500 a season. I don't know how many they get at Saint Gobain, but it can't be much more. Further south they have a few more structures open to the public, they're easier to get to in general, and they're a bit lower in altitude. Especially in the Alpes Maritimes. And then to the east up there, they're good, they've got lots of entrances. But it's always associations, you know. It's because they're really easy to access and visible. We've asked the local authorities, the army and so on, but they don't want to help, they're not interested. They don't care about this heritage you see, there's even a fortification that was used by the fire brigade, they've set fire to it several times and now it's very fragile, it's on the verge of collapsing. And anyway, they'll be around longer than any of us, but they'll eventually disappear anyway - they're not eternal, they do fall apart. And even if we can renovate, the problem is getting the insurance to allow people to visit.

**L- What are you doing to try and promote the memory? And why try to preserve it?**

LD- I think communication is really the problem. You may have noticed, but nobody knows that there was a war in 1940, that there was the Army of the Alps. You ask people and they only know about the Resistance, so we explain it to them and then they get



interested, but the big problem is that it's not well known.

At the Telegraphe fort, we've installed outdoor lights and we have a website that can be accessed from the town next to it. Just renovating the building is certainly not enough. I can clearly see that people come, but they're not in the region for the historical tourism, which is very limited. They're in the valley for skiing or other activities in the summer, and then one day they are bored and ask themselves, 'Oh, what can we do today?'. We then help each other out here, we put up leaflets about other fortifications in the area to visit. In the east, for example, there's almost a war going on to see who can attract the most people, as there are more potential visitors. Over there and in Italy, the fortifications are more well-known and there's a larger population nearby. In Italy, Turin is just an hour's drive away. If we were in Chambéry, there would already be more people, I think. And then in Italy they refurbish everything, they renovate for tourism.

I don't know if you've noticed, but we've set up a triptych on the local fortifications, in collaboration with the local authorities. These are frescoes, positioned in different places, which explain the history of each fortification and of the Battle of the Alps in general. There are also QR codes for those who want more information. There's also a Michelin guide that has been written and the website that I created, 'Mémoire des Alpes'.

**L- In Seloge it's amazing because it's on the path of the Mont Blanc tours and yet I have the impression that it's not any better known than that despite the passage ?**

LD- Yes, but you know, those who do the tours of Mont Blanc only think about the route. They want to get to the refuge as quickly as possible, to eat. But I think the Seloges structure belongs to a private individual. So if they renovated it a bit and during the summer they set up a refreshment stand next to it and let people visit, it might work out well as there's a lot of people passing by. But we're not fighting any more, we've fought before but it's no use. It's a shame, we've accumulated some great treasures. All these uniforms, weapons, archives and testimonies collected are of no interest to anybody, they'll all be lost. I can see that, I've written 18 books, and they don't sell very well, they don't interest people, they don't know.

## 20/11\_ Discussion with two locals, on the way down from Seloges

**L- I am researching on fortifications of the Maginot Line in the Alps ...**

M1- Ah yes, you went to see Seloges then ?

**L- Exactly, have you ever been there ?**

M1- Well yes, We've been going up there since we were kids, so we know it well.

M2- The first time I went up there, we used candles to get light inside. Now we take the kids and play in it, they love it!

**L- And do you know of any other structures like this in the area, do you have an idea why they were built there?**

M1- Oh well, it was during the Cold War was it? or the Second World War maybe.

M2- Well, other structures uhm yes, there's the one at the top of the Mountain over there, the Combottier I think, and then I don't know.

### 20/11\_ Discussion with Gauthier, back at home.

G-I would be more than happy to go back and visit other structures. I'd already visited some in Alsace or Normandy up there and it's actually really different, there it's a really visible square blocks, whereas here there is a lot of galleries and they are buried! It's really strange that they were built so remote, it's not really understandable. But otherwise it's fun to explore like that, I like it. And I didn't know they existed at all. My brother knew of some, further south, as he goes there to climb, and my parents told me about a big work in the area when I told them what you were looking for.

### 22/11\_ Discussion with a (32) years old on the parking to Fort du Replat, he is in the region for work.

He entered the fort by climbing the entrance gate, which is closed and marked off-limits. He was not familiar with the fortifications of the Savoie Maginot Line, but he is from Le Havre and has visited the bunkers there many times. He has always liked 'war things', so as he had some free time before the start of his work and spotted the fort from the bottom of the valley, he decided to give it a try.

### 22/11 Discussion with Manu during the day. (Phone call before the trip)

**L- Did your grandparents who fought in the war tell you anything about their experience?**

M- One of them very quickly explained to me that he was in the war, where he was and little bits of information like that, the other one who was at Mont Cenis never said anything, he took everything with him to the grave and in the light of what his fellow soldiers have said it was better that way, it wasn't pretty.

**L- When did you start finding interest in WW2 fortifications ?**

M- I grew up in Mont-Cenis, and my grandparents fought in the war in 1940, at the Pass and the Pas du Roc too. That's how I got into the world of fortifications. After that, you try to find out why they are there and who was in them.

**L- Do you have a favorite structure ?**

M- Yes ! The structure of the Lavoir, the Pas du Roc and the Operas at the Pass. I think he loves the lavoir because it is in a beautiful state of conservation and it is a big structure. For the rest I think it's because of his family history...

**L- What do you think should happen to the structures in the future ?**

M- Well, it would be good if they were preserved, that would be a good start! He is a member of the Musée de la Traversée des Alpes association and guides summer tours. He has visited fortifications all over France and would like to continue, but he doesn't have the time and his health is a problem. So for the time being, he's staying in the Maurienne, especially at Mont Cenis. He spends all his free time visiting structures. In general, he doesn't visit the whole structure at once; he prefers to come back. He's not interested in taking things (there's a lot of looting, the associations are afraid of it, many of the photos of structures on the internet don't show the position for this reason), he just wants to enjoy the space, the fortification as such. He's not particularly interested in the technical aspects either (at least not any more, although he does know a lot about them),



such as the types of weapons, etc.

### 23/11 Discussion with 2 Municipality workers (Aussoir)

L- If I tell you 'Fortifications of the Maginot Line from the Second World War', do you imagine those structures in the Maurienne region, in the valleys and mountains ?

M1- Humm, I don't know... Are you talking maybe of Saint Gobain?

L- Yes it's one of them! It is a Museum now so it is possible to visit it.

M2- Yes... Other than that, what is there ? Are there any other fortifications of the Maginot Line ?

L- Yes, there is the Sapey, Replaton, Amodon...

M2- Oh Sapey and Replaton are also part of the Maginot Line ? And what about the Télégraphe ?

L- It is and older construction but it was occupied during the Second World War.

M1- What about the Fort of Esseillon and those kind, it should be similar to the Télégraphe then.

L- Yes, exactly. Have you ever visited Saint Gobain ?

M2- No not really, we know it exists but we never been, we were never curious about that.

M1- And the Fort of Esseillon, did you ever visited it ?

L- No not yet, can I go there freely ? Is it open ?

M2- Oh yes, it's all open and it's fun, there's even a treasure hunt for the kids and everything!

M1- And... The Tilted House, is it part of the fortifications as well ?

L- Apparently yes, have you visited it ?

M2- So what happened, it slipped ?

M1- Yes this one we visited yes, it's a fun thing to do and it is easy to access, just on the side of the road. There is a lot of people that go there you know, some come in the valley simply to see this fortification !

### 23/11 Discussion the Vice President and a member of the association 'Musée de la Traversée des Alpes'

L- This Maginot structure is in very good condition. Did you renovate it?

M- When we bought it from the army it was already in very good condition. It wasn't put to any service during the war, but the army kept it afterwards and continued to maintain it to a minimum to store ammunition and other items.

L- Have you visited any other Maginot works?

M- Well, you know, if you've seen one you've seen them all... But otherwise I visited the Lavoir and the Sapey.

L- I saw yesterday that you also own Fort de Replaton?

M- Yes, but it's not really a Maginot fort, it's a Séré de Rivière, and I think the additions were even made by the Germans during the Occupation (false). We must have had it for 30 years.

L- Do you have any particular plans for this fort, or did you acquire it so that it could be visited like Saint Gobain?

M- The problem is money. We don't really have any money coming in.

L- Are you looking after it at the moment? For example, I saw that you use horses to weed?

M- Yes, we use sheep or horses to clean up around the site, but that's about it. We can't open the Fort to visitors as it's too dangerous.

L- Why did you become a member of the association ?

M- It's mainly because we're all friends, we're together!

L- How many members is there in the Association ?

VP- We have 12 members. I joined because I was doing the cleaning around the structure and one day the President asked me to become a member.

L- Have you visited any other structures? Exclusively with the association?

VP- Yes, I've visited others, mainly in groups with the association.

L- What do you think should happen to the structures in the future ?

VP- I imagine that the fortifications will disappear, unless other associations come together to restore them, but otherwise they'll disappear.

L- Do you get many visitors to the museum?

VP- We're open from June to September and people from all over Europe come to see us. Families, enthusiasts, school groups - we really do have a bit of everyone! Outside these dates, we're also open to groups of at least 12 people, which is exceptional these days.

M- People like it here because it's a bit old fashioned, it's in good condition but you can still see the rust and seepage, so people say it feels more 'real'. Some Swiss people have been here and they prefer Saint Gobain's work to theirs because it's more authentic; in their country you could eat off the floor, which loses a bit of the impact.

24/11 Discussion in the car to Lyon. 1M 30 yo. 1F 45 yo.

They ask about my research. There's a young psychologist from Annecy, he didn't know about the Maginot Line in the Alps and when I explain more, he seems to still be imagining the forts of Séré de Rivière or Sardes of Esseillon. The lady next to him is a teacher in Annecy and doesn't know about the Maginot Line in the Alps either, nor is she interested in it. The prospect of a visit doesn't seem to be of much attraction to them.





Fig 115\_Photographs Fiel Trip November 2023, By Author (2023).

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Fig 116\_Photographs Fiel Trip November 2023, By Author (2023).

Forgotten  
Heritage  
of World  
War II, the  
Narratives  
of the  
French Alps  
fortifications

Heritage

Magnet

After-life

Bunkers

Fortifications

Decay