Project sponsor:
Fondazione Prada
c/o Patriziato di Ravecchia
Via Ravecchia 44
CH- 6500 Bellinzona
E-mail: info@fondazione-prada.ch

Restoration and enhancement of the medieval village of Prada

Summary of interventions 2022 - 2026



November 2026

Ala Réssighe 8
6523 Preonzo
Mobile 079 595 07 62
andrea.demarta@bluewin.ch
www.demarta-forestale.ch

Ing. Forestale ETH
ANDREA DEMARTA
STUDIO D'INGEGNERIA FORESTALE

Contents

1. HISTORY OF PRADA 2

2. FONDAZIONE PRADA 4

3. PROJECT OBJECTIVES 5

4. INTERVENTIONS 5

1. History of Prada

The ancient medieval settlement of Prada, protected at the cantonal level since 2019, is a unique example at the Ticino level, and probably also at the Swiss level, of a small mountain residential core from the late Middle Ages. It provides a glimpse into life in the alpine valleys from the late Middle Ages to around 1600. The name Prada, from the Latin *prata*, meaning meadows, also suggests the appearance of the surrounding territory, once characterized by meadows, gardens, vineyards, small fields, chestnut groves, workshops and much more.

Unfortunately, little is known about the history of Prada and its inhabitants. It is estimated that Prada was founded before 1200, although there are no definitive sources on the matter. Nevertheless, for the period in question, it represents a unique testimony to the way of life and urban organization of small pre-alpine villages. In particular, Prada was divided into two parts, Prada di sotto and Prada di sopra, connected by the mule track that led from Ravecchia to the mid-mountain pastures and further up towards the alpine pastures. Regarding Prada di Sopra, it consists of a small group of houses (about 20) surrounded by some terraces once cultivated. Prada di sotto developed instead along a short terrace, around the church of Santi Girolamo e Rocco. In total, there are about 50 constructions, including houses, barns and other rural buildings. The houses, unlike the more recently built farmhouses that we are accustomed to seeing on our mountains or alpine pastures, are built with double-faced stone walls bound with high-quality lime mortar. The doors, as well as the windows, were surmounted by large stone lintels or stone arches. This type of lintel can still be found in some buildings hidden in the old centres of the villages around Bellinzona and probably also in other areas of Ticino. They were simple buildings, but tall up to three floors, consisting of a single room, connected externally, without chimneys and cellars. Among the various buildings, on the western side of the ancient village of Prada, there is a series of particular houses that differ from the others also in their state of conservation. They are a sort of terraced (row) buildings of considerable size. These houses were still clearly visible from the plain in the second half of the 1700s (Schinz A. R. "Descrizione della Svizzera italiana nel 1700"). All constructions were connected by paths and lanes, cart tracks and the already mentioned mule track. The ancient inhabitants cultivated the terraces surrounding the villages of Prada di sopra and Prada di sotto with cereals such as rye, millet and barley. The terraces were also cultivated for about a third with vines.

An interesting note is that Prada was also visited by St. Charles Borromeo during one of his numerous visits to our Canton in 1583, a year before his death. Thanks to his notes, it is known that at that time Prada had approximately 40 hearths (between 150 and 200 people), in a period in which Bellinzona had approximately 1200-1400 inhabitants.

Beyond all these general considerations, Prada remains mysterious, as are still the causes of its abandonment, which occurred during the so-called Borromeo plague (1629 – 1630). The legend says that the place became a lazaretto, although more probably a series of contributing causes determined

its abandonment. What is certain, based on the surveys made in the first phase of consolidation and enhancement of the village of Prada just concluded, is that the village was not abandoned precipitously as the inhabitants had the prudence and time to dismantle and recover everything that could be useful for the construction of other buildings or for daily life. For this reason, practically no finds were recovered, not even the stone slabs of the roofs. Very probably also the beams and floorboards, as well as the doors and windows, were removed to be reused. During this phase it was also possible to observe how the masonry of the buildings is of excellent workmanship and that it certainly was a permanent settlement.

In any case, the population of Ravecchia never forgot that place. In fact, it continued to maintain and also to enlarge the small church dedicated to San Girolamo and San Rocco, where the parish priest was required to be present to celebrate Mass twelve times per year. As late as 1904, on four occasions, he was accompanied by the people who followed him in procession. Today the tradition of the procession has ceased, but the Holy Masses are still celebrated for Pentecost Monday and for the feast of S. Rocco at the beginning of August. On these occasions, on the ground in front of the church it was traditionally customary to organize a communal packed-lunch. Since the 1980s, thanks to funds obtained from the previously mentioned group "Nümm da Prada", later established as "Associazione Nümm da Prada", with on-site organization of the two annual festivals and other initiatives. All this with the consent of the Parish of S. Biagio of Ravecchia, owner, since 1956, of the sacred building. Prior to that date, the church was not registered in the land register and was managed by two canepari, descendants of the ancient members of the Vicinanza di Prada. To regularize this gap, a meeting of the descendants of the Vicini di Prada was convened, who decided that the church should be entered in the land register as property of the Parish of Ravecchia.

It should also be noted that, although the buildings were abandoned, the management of Prada's agricultural surfaces continued until the beginning of the 20th century. Subsequently, slowly but inexorably, the forest began to overtake the old constructions and the surfaces that had been managed until shortly before. Only the church of Santi Girolamo e Rocco has been spared this fate. Today, when venturing into the hamlet of Prada, one is struck by the presence of old walls, up to 5 metres high, protruding from the ground, seemingly challenging their fate. Amid the remains of the old houses, now partially consolidated and cleared of collapse material, the aforementioned church stands intact, having undergone significant restoration interventions since the 1980s. These interventions have been promoted by the aforementioned *Nümm da Prada* group. The group supports and involves the Parish of San Biagio di Ravecchia, owner of the Prada church, specifically securing funds for the restoration expenses. One of these was the new stone-slab roof and many other works that have followed over the years. Nevertheless, much remains to be done.

2. Fondazione Prada

In 2016 Fondazione Prada was established with the purpose of reviving the ancient village of Prada in order to promote and enhance the discovery of a distant past linked to the historical and cultural roots of the Bellinzona territory, in close collaboration with the four city Patriziati (Ravecchia, Bellinzona, Carasso and Daro), the Municipality of Bellinzona, the Parish of Ravecchia and the Association Nümm da Prada. As written by Dr. Giuseppe Chiesi, “The residential nucleus of Prada represents, in terms of number and antiquity of dwellings and structures linked to the settlement, a ‘unicum’ whose historical and archaeological importance is undisputed. The enhancement of this testimony requires the implementation of appropriate measures: a detailed analysis of the surviving structures through the survey of what has withstood the test of time, the adoption of urgent measures to curb degradation, the partial removal of collapse material to reveal the supporting walls, the accesses and communication routes, the consolidation of the buildings.”

The Foundation’s vision is, through successive stages, to restore and give new splendour to what remains of Prada as a historical element of absolute value to be preserved and enhanced. It is also aware that the recovery of the entire village is difficult to implement, both technically and financially. For this reason, it is planned to intervene in successive stages on buildings and specific elements that are more deserving of conservation and that can fit within this concept. In this way it is easier to pursue the set objectives and to ensure the long-term management of the recovered works.



Fig. 1: Facade view of complex 7 after the recovery and consolidation works of 2023 (Phase 1).

3. Project objectives

The main objectives of the project are as follows:

a) Historical: Preserve as much as possible of the old medieval village of Prada and increase historical knowledge;

b) Landscape: Stop the degradation of the settlement of Prada and the banalisation of the surrounding landscape;

c) Educational: Gather as much information as possible about the village, develop an informational concept for all interested parties (schools, private individuals, professionals, tourists, …) and reconstruct an exemplary element of the village;

d) Touristic: Improve pedestrian access and create a sustainable tourism offer (historical and cultural tourism).

4. Interventions

Fondazione Prada during the winter period 2016-2017 promoted, as a first step, a significant forest-cutting intervention in the area of Prada in order to reduce the risk of possible further damage to the vestiges of the buildings, caused by the collapse of trees or branches, or by root action.

More recently, within the framework of the restoration and enhancement project for the medieval village of Prada – Phase 1 (Demarta 2019), the following interventions have already been carried out (see plan Fig. 2):

- Recovery and consolidation of 9 buildings and the partial consolidation of an additional 11;
- Recovery and reconstruction of various dry-stone walls within the village;
- Precise arrangement of access paths, creation of a bypass path around the village, partial recovery of an old access path;
- Cutting of hazardous plants adjacent to the village;
- Setting up of educational and informational activities;
- Preparation of outreach documentation;
- Detailed survey of the consolidated constructions and of the progress of the works.
- Regular management of the surfaces (management of neophytes, mowing, ...)
- Design of the arrangement and enhancement of the area in front of the churchyard (building permit application in progress).

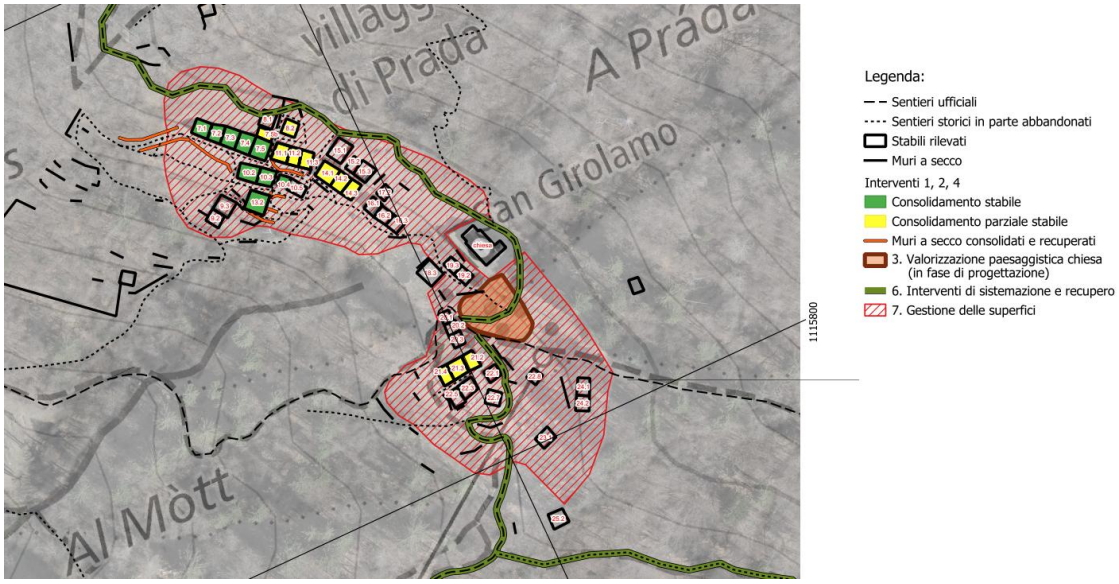

Fig. 2: Survey of buildings Prada di Sotto with areas already treated (see final report Demarta 2024).



Fig. 3: Buildings of complexes 7 and 10 during the consolidation interventions.



Fig. 4: In the foreground the consolidated buildings of complex 10, with complex 7 in the background.

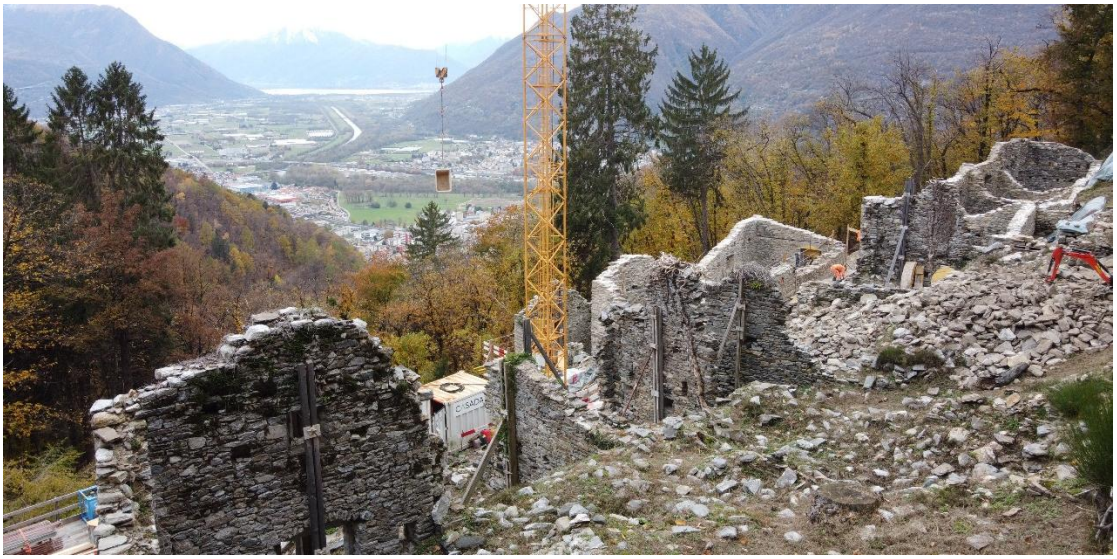

Fig. 5: Complex 11, subject of interventions in 2024-2025, and view of the Magadino Plain.

The project is currently in Phase 2, which began in June 2026 and includes the following works:

- Recovery and consolidation of an additional 19 buildings, including their archaeological surveys;
- Recovery and reconstruction of various dry-stone walls and other artefacts within the village;
- Photogrammetric surveys of the entire village;
- Removal of additional precarious trees adjacent to the village;
- Implementation of educational and informational activities in collaboration with schools;
- Preparation of outreach documentation.



Fig. 6: Charred remains found within Complex 11, which will be dated by C14.



Fig. 7: First hearth found within a building.

In Phase 3, the following interventions are planned:

- Construction of the reception building “Cà da Prada”;
- Rehabilitation and enhancement of the area in front of the churchyard.

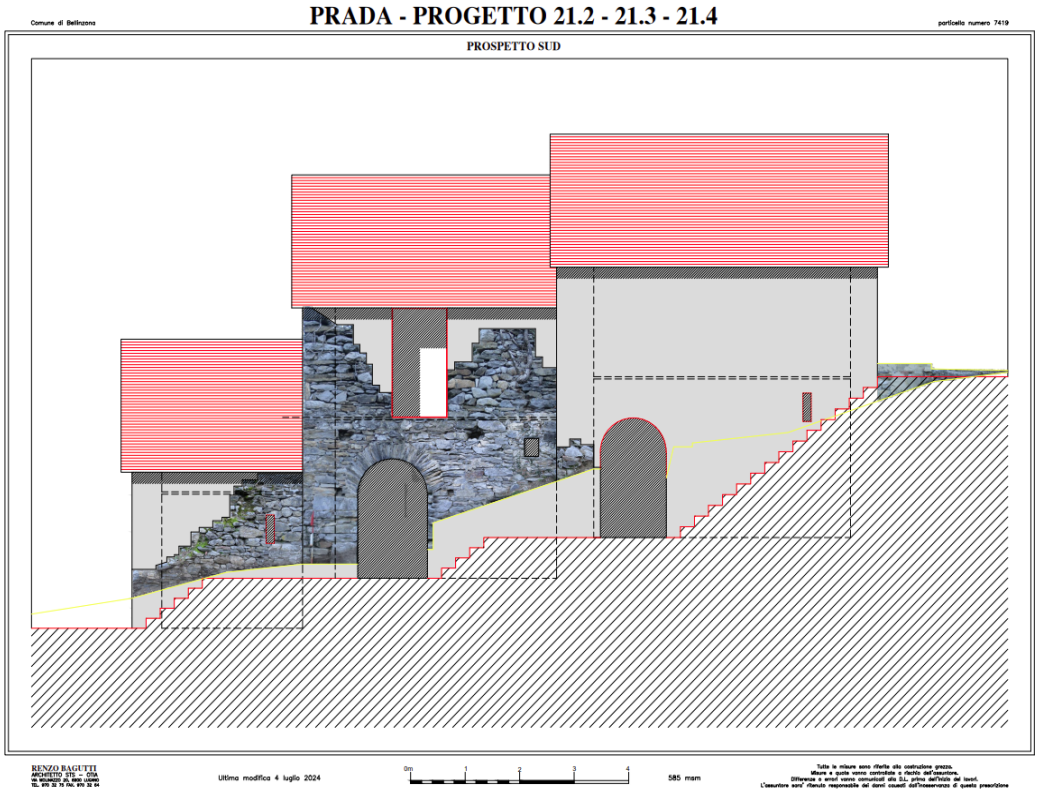

Fig. 8: Project of the reception building “Cà da Prada”.



Fig. 9: Landscaping of the ground in front of the churchyard.

Preonzo, November 2026

Ing. A. Demarta