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## 2014 Research at Andrews

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# SIMPLICITY AND HUMANITY

*Waldenses and Environmental Design*

*View from Fenestrelle, Piedmont, Italy*

**High up in the mountains of Northern Italy, nestled in the Piedmont Valleys, are the settlements and ancient structures of the Waldensian people. In early June, students from Andrews University can be seen wandering around the ancient complexes that rest on the slopes and valleys of the Cottian Alps, sketching the simple architecture of the devout Waldensian people.**

The modern Waldenses are descended from Italian refugees who were forced to flee from their homes for preaching the gospel. The ancient Waldenses had apostolic roots and emphasized simplicity and poverty in their daily life. They rejected a number of prominent Catholic teachings and were consequently persecuted. To escape the persecution, many fled to the wild mountains and valleys of Northern Italy, where a Waldensian community still survives today.

While much of their history has been obscured by conflicting accounts and many of their early historical documents have been destroyed, some records of their origins remain. Records from the Inquisition and other sources confirm the pure and simple Christian lifestyle that they sacrificed their lives for.

Professor Kathleen Demsky, director of the Architecture Resource Center (ARC), began leading the Waldensian tour in the late 1990s after she traveled to Italy to visit a friend. During her trip, she became convinced that

the Andrews University architecture program would benefit from a study abroad opportunity, in which students could experience firsthand the grand architecture and history of Europe.

"I kept bringing up the idea of a study tour in faculty meeting," Demsky explains, "and finally, Lew Seibold, who was then the director of the Division of Architecture, agreed. He had received a research grant and he sent me to Northern Italy to develop a plan for a new study tour."

Demsky spent a month in Italy with her husband, making arrangements. However, as her planning for the tour took shape, Demsky sought to provide some kind of contrast to the richly ornamented buildings of Rome and Milan. "And then it came to me," Demsky describes excitedly, "Waldensian history! That's right here in Italy."

Demsky returned from Italy and checked out of all the books concerning the Waldenses that could be found in the stacks at James

**The small, stone houses and churches built next to high mountain streams and on rocky ledges speak of an appreciation for nature, fresh air, light and color.**

White Library. Her research and planning eventually led to the curriculum and syllabus for the first tour. For the inaugural tour, she arranged for a pastor from Rome to come to Villa Aurora for six weeks and teach the students about Waldensian history. The tour then continued, with Demsky, up to the Piedmont Valleys.

Demsky now teaches the students herself. She has visited two of the three repositories of Waldensian original documents and has become a veritable expert on Waldensian history. She continues to research their history and publishes an annual "Waldensian Tour Guide," as part of a continuing effort to spread the story of the Waldensian Christians.

Since Demsky's first tour, the Europe architecture trip has been split into two tours: the Architecture Summer Abroad class, now led by Andrew von Maur, and the Waldensian tour, led by Demsky. Andrews architecture students often do the two tours back-to-back. The large cities of Europe, with

their monumental and embellished architecture, provide a stark contrast with the hand-built, vernacular homes of the Waldenses, perched on the mountains of the Piedmonts.

"The students



*Kathleen Demsky*



tain. It was such a beautiful little church and I couldn't ever imagine a more perfect church setting," the student shared animatedly.

The small, stone houses and churches built next to high mountain streams and on rocky ledges speak of an appreciation for nature, fresh air, light and color. These are also things that Demsky has come to value in her work as the Custodian of the Environmental Design



venue each year—from the U.S. to Canada, Scotland and Mexico. Demsky inherited the collection, and the responsibility of the EDRA display, through the negotiations of Neville Clouten, former dean of architecture. In 1987, he had arranged for Andrews University to take over the annual book displays, which included purchasing the previous 18 years' worth of books, documents and technical papers. Those books now reside with the Architecture Resource Center's collections, along with the new, annual and curated selections of books that are presented at each EDRA conference.

Throughout the year, Demsky and her staff collect the newest publications on environmental design and related areas of focus from hundreds of publishers around the world. They are then displayed at the conference in an area where attendees can sit and read the latest research in their disciplines. "It's the heart of the conference," Demsky admits, "There are people who say that if the display was not there, they wouldn't come to the conference. They discover things they wouldn't find any other way."

EDRA conference participants and attendees include both professors and grassroots architects. "And they just think that Andrews University is the most amazing place!" Demsky exclaims. In fact, architects travel from all over the country just to do research in the Architecture Resource Center (ARC), where they can access some of the one-of-a-kind documents and books that make up just a fraction of the expansive EDRA collection.

The ARC houses the EDRA archives as well as two rare book collections donated by Ronald Senseman, Fellow of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), and Vernon Watson, a Chicago Prairie-style architect. Watson designed the original Griggs Hall, which was built in 1938 and served as the original campus library. It later housed the Religion & Biblical Languages and International Language Studies departments before it was torn down in 2010 to make way for the new Undergraduate Learning Center: Buller Hall and Nethery Hall. The collections include rare books, photographs of architecture from the 19th century, and some of Senseman's original drawings and sketches. Due to the volume of material, the archives are housed at another location on campus. "But," Demsky says hopefully, "My dream is to have the vault here."



**TOP:** A student sketches Tempio Valdese in Torre Pellice. **RIGHT:** Inside the Waldensian Synod. **BOTTOM:** Students gather in the garden of Marco Rostan's 500-year old Waldensian home.

Research Association (EDRA) publication collection.

EDRA is an organization that began in 1968 as part of an effort to change the way architecture is designed. "It began with some 'maverick students' in North Carolina who thought 'Wait a minute, architects are often building grand things to glorify the self. What about the human

factor in design? How does what we build affect people?'" Demsky explains.

Those students, and professionals like them, began to examine how people utilize buildings and are affected by them. They experimented with light, space and colors and, with the aid of behavioral and social scientists, studied how people reacted. For example, they discovered that allowing more light into classrooms increased students' test scores, and that a patient in a well-lit hospital room recovered more quickly. "It's a huge, huge story that just excites and fascinates me," Demsky says enthusiastically.

Each year, Demsky and her husband pack close to 300 books into their van and drive to the annual EDRA conference where they display the latest publications on environmental design. The conference is held at a different

have sketching they have to do and the simplicity just screams out at them," Demsky elaborates. Many of the buildings are original and have only been reinforced as necessary, permitting amazing views of ancient construction techniques and styles. Students also visit the College of the Barbas, or Barbs, where Waldensian pastors educated members of their community, and the cave church where Waldensian worship services were held in secret.

The students keep a journal during the tour as part of their classwork. One student was impressed by the simplicity of a particular Waldensian church, which was built after 1798. "The church of Angroña was perched on the mountainside in such a way that leads one to believe that the mountain had been created for the church, and not the church for the moun-