

Tunnel Vision

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Detour ahead: Le Gallerie is a twin tunnel-turned-exhibition space in Italy's Dolomite Mountains. (Photography by Pierluigi Faggion)

New York's celebrated High Line may have turned an old rail trestle into a park, but the Northern Italian city of Trento has one-upped Manhattan, reclaiming two 1,000-foot-long tunnels in the Dolomite Mountains as an experimental history museum—and a fascinating example of the reuse of abandoned infrastructure.

Built in the 1970s, and wide enough to accommodate four side-by-side tractor trailers, the tunnels cut through the city, their access ways scarring a working-class neighborhood. When a new highway on Trento's outskirts made them obsolete in 2006, the authorities decided to transform the tunnels into a public space.

Enter Stanford Humanities Lab professor Jeffrey Schnapp and Elisabetta Terragni, an Italian architect and associate professor at the City College of New York. During the summer of 2008, they teamed up with FilmWork, a local production company, as well as the Historical Museum in Trento and Italian graphic designers Gruppe Gut to transform the 7,000-square-foot space into a museum focusing on the province's history during World War I. "The experiment was to create a laboratory of what a history museum might look like," Schnapp told *AN* at the first international presentation of the project at Columbia University's Italian Academy on March 2.



Inside the first tunnel, projections fill the darkened passageway.

Le Gallerie, as the site was named, translates as both "art gallery" and "tunnel" in Italian. The aim was to keep the feeling of walking a highway tunnel, preserving the asphalt on the ground, the vault of the ceiling, and the roughness and cracks in the concrete walls. "We used the tunnel as an image of this region, in which people emigrated and moved through countries," Terragni said. "Trentino is a district on the border, and the war hit hard because of this. The experience of traveling was therefore something we wanted to include."

The museum is arranged as a route leading from one tunnel to the other. The first is a darkened space with projections on the ground and walls, like a gallery of ghosts that evoke the region's past. Walking back through the second tunnel, visitors explore interpretive materials in an entirely white-painted space.



The return route offers exhibits installed within the tunnel's arching, white-painted space.

The initial exhibition proved a success, and a second show, entitled *Historically ABC*, is now open, presenting the history of the region through the use of a large-scale alphabet. The project was selected as one of the finalists for architecture review *Abitare's Italian Oxygen 2* design competition, where admirers can [vote](#) for the entry and view a photo gallery of the tunnel's latest exhibition.

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