Jürg Conzet is a high wire act, following in the footsteps of the Swiss engineering tradition. This belies his central contribution to reviving vernacular stickbau buildings in contemporary form, with Graubünden architects like Zunthor, Gian Caminada and Conradin Chiavari.

ONE MARCH MORNING in 1999 Jürg Conzet woke in his Graubünden home near Chur. He went, as he does most days, to the engineering firm offices he'd set up with two partners, Gianfranco Bronzini and Patrick Gurtman, seven years earlier. At some point during the day, however, some stunning news came through. The Traversina bridge, a truly extraordinary and beautiful footbridge which spanned a steep gorge along the Viamala—a regionally well-loved hiking trail to the south of Chur—had by some chance been struck by a falling boulder, and been thoroughly destroyed.

'The bridge was very beautiful, but I don't think it was as bad as people thought it was.' Conzet recounted in a country with a formidable engineering reputation, Conzet is one of Switzerland's best known current generation of engineers. He is also a poet in the profession of structural engineering. The Traversina was as much a poetic as a pragmatic design, employing an elegant and extremely lightweight larch wood truss system, known in engineering literature as a Flabelli. The Flabelli truss was joined to the heavier glulam-laminated upper deck walkway section of the bridge through vertical struts pushing outwards from the deck and a cut-out of suspended chrome-nickel-steel wire. The two systems were overlayed and connected providing the strength to hold the bridge across the gorge. It was a striking piece of engineering and a personal threshold in Conzet's career thus far, when it was completed three years before the accident in 1996.

If he went through massive doubts over the next days and weeks, Conzet appears to have been charged with a renewed energy, as within two years a second Traversina bridge was being manoeuvred into a new, higher and less vulnerable position. It is equally exquisite, hanging across the ravine, joined by gusset rings and pieces of thread, draping 47 metres across the gully gap below. What he needed to resolve, Conzet told an audience at the Architectural Association talk in early 2007, was the problem of finding a curve which is contact free during a snow load. The challenge was in the detailing of the abutments, completed without the usual software, since computers 'could not deal with such deformations.'

Those who have visited the second Traversina bridge will know the sense of astonishment when rounding the track corner and coming upon the bridge, after the first sight of the concrete abutments which hold and anchor its suspension cables in place. The bridge is not in the middle of nowhere, but the narrow, steeply climbing path betrays no sense of any major European engineering project lying imminently ahead. If the Viamala walking trail is renowned for its breathtaking Alpine grandeur, Traversina 2 is equal to the stunning landscape which it is part of. The day I was there an old man was crossing with his dog, and once over and before I had begun crossing we talked in Swiss-German. He was pointing to something down in the gorge below. At first I couldn't make out what it was, but then realised that he was pointing to a tree, and began to realise he was saying that we could only see its unusual and beautiful leaves because of the bridge. I felt, even if the bridge was man-made, Traversina 2 was a design which was in deep sympathy with its natural surroundings. It confirmed the frequently made observation that for Conzet and his generation of Graubünden architects and engineers, the natural world is very important. Certainly looking down is precipitous and dramatic, and if you're beginning at the southern lower end, as you look out across the slowly rising steps like some softly inclining escalator, the sense of wonder only increases. An alerted inner voice momentarily questions the wisdom of crossing, but once you step (from the south side) onto the bridge's ascending wooden steps, they are reassuringly firm. During our meeting in the Chur office, I'm surprised that Conzet makes just this point about the hanging steps. During public meetings about rebuilding Traversina, he remembers that people said it would be frightening for people walking across it: 'This meant we changed it, and it was improved by this discussion. It was a very democratic procedure,'

Technically Traversina 2 is what is called a pre-stressed cable truss, with two sets of cables thrown across the gully from each of the gorge's rocky edges. While the higher, northern set of cables ends at the abutments where a hiker begins or ends their crossing, on the other side the cables rise high above, where the