

# CONSERVATION— ADAPTATION

KEEPING ALIVE THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE  
ADAPTIVE REUSE OF HERITAGE  
WITH SYMBOLIC VALUE

Donatella Fiorani  
Loughlin Kealy  
Stefano Francesco Musso

Editors



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Donatella Fiorani, Loughlin Kealy, Stefano Francesco Musso

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This book presents presents the papers written by 39 participants following the 5th Workshop on Conservation, organised by the Conservation Network of the European Association for Architectural Education in Hasselt/Liège in 2015. All papers have been peer-reviewed. The Workshop was attended by 73 participants from the following countries: Belgium, Czech Republic, Ireland, Italy, Montenegro, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Turkey, United Kingdom.

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## THE ADAPTIVE REUSE OF MONASTIC STRUCTURES. PORTUGUESE EXAMPLES AND DIDACTIC EXPERIENCES

Teresa Cunha Ferreira

University of Porto, Portugal  
tferreira@arq.up.pt

This discussion paper focuses particularly on the adaptive reuse of disused monasteries and convents, which are of great importance in the Portuguese context due both to their strategic presence in the territory and to the large number of abandoned structures that have survived until the present day. Considering their historical importance in the local economy and their place in the landscape, these structures offer great potential for adaptive reuse, including the regeneration of the surrounding territory through the recovery of their ancient systems (accesses, paths, walls, water supply systems, gardens, buildings, etc). Hence, this subject calls for reflections beyond the question of their compatible functions, namely the connection of these structures with the landscape and local communities, the relationship between 'old and new' (because new uses often require new constructions and infrastructures), and the incorporation of intangible values (spiritual, ascetic, symbolic, etc.) into contemporary interventions. All these issues make such places an interesting opportunity for architectural research, practice and pedagogy.

As Alois Riegl maintained, a 'monument's' physical life is a precondition of its psychic life (Riegl 1995 [1903]). However, the adaptive reuse of buildings inevitably submits them to an exhibition and transformation process that fatally removes them from their original contexts and meanings (Sola-Morales 2000 [1996]; Ferreira 2011). In this way, how can one find a balance between the positive enjoyment of old structures and the embodiment of their intangible values such as their significance and memories? How can one recover principles of self-sufficiency by promoting the regeneration of the landscape and territory, in close liaison with the local communities? How can one preserve their multi-layered consistency (both tangible and intangible) into contemporary interventions? When new additions are needed or requested, how can these issues be related to the old structure, searching for coherence when moving from the general concept to detail?

### *Portuguese examples*

In Portugal, a case in point in the current debate is the adaptive reuse of disused buildings – monastic structures and convents, palaces or castles – which are often converted into hotels or given other uses. Some important examples of such conversions in the Portuguese context are the interventions undertaken at the former monastic structures of the Convento de São Gonçalo in Amarante (museum, A. Soutinho, 1973–1980), the Convento de Santa Marinha da Costa (hotel, F. Távora, 1975–1982), the Convento de Refóios do Lima (Faculty of Agronomy, F. Távora, 1986–1991), Soares dos Reis Museum (museum, F. Távora, 1988–2000), the Convento da Flor da Rosa in Portalegre (hotel, J. Carrilho da Graça, 1992–1995), the Convento de Nossa Senhora da Conceição in

FIG. 1. Convento de Santa Marinha da Costa, new building [at the front] and old convent [at the back].

FIG. 2 . Convento de Santa Marinha da Costa, restaurant.

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FIG. 3. Convento de Santa Marinha da Costa, cloister.



Arraiolos (hotel, J. Paulo dos Santos, 1993–1997) and the Convento de Santa Maria do Bouro (hotel, E. Souto de Moura and H. Vieira, 1989–1997).

The criterion used in selecting the case studies presented in this paper involved focusing on similar pre-existing structures (abandoned convents of medieval origin) that had been converted in the last 40 years: the first group of examples relates to ‘mono-functional’ conversions of structures that were required to perform a similar function (boutique hotels), while the second group consisted of ‘multifunctional’ conversions of structures required to perform a wider range of functions (different uses). Some reflections will be provided on the relationship of these structures with the surrounding territory, on the strategy adopted for the inclusion of new uses, and on questions linked to material preservation and to the embodiment of intangible values in architectural interventions.

### *Boutique hotels*

The conversion of the disused Convento de Santa Marinha da Costa (1975–1982) was undertaken by Fernando Távora, who was an important architect and university lecturer, as well as one of the few Portuguese participants in the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM). Besides this, Távora was, in theory, practice and pedagogy, strongly committed to finding a link between tradition and modernity, using history as a tool for contemporary design. The work on the Convento da Costa marked the beginning of a new period in the Portuguese culture of conservation/restoration, as it introduced a different approach to the relationship between old and new. The architect rejected the proposal made by the Directorate-General of Buildings and National Monuments (DGEMN) to include a new floor of rooms in the attic of the pre-existing structure with the use of a mimetic language. Instead, he proposed the conservation of the former monastic building and the addition of a new building using contemporary

architectural language in a setting position that follows the principles of its constructive evolution over time. The forms and materials of the 'new' are carefully studied so as to ensure a harmonious integration with the pre-existing building, evoking themes that can be related both to a 'curtain wall' and to the façades of traditional local architecture. According to Távora, 'the general criterion adopted in the project [...] was 'continuing inovat-ing' or, in other words, to continue contributing to the long life of the building, by conserving and strengthening its most significant spaces or creating qualified spaces determined by the conditions of its new function. The intention was to create a dialogue, highlighting the affinities and the continuity rather than the differences and the break from the past' (Távora 1985: 77). As far as the functional strategy of the intervention was concerned, Távora sought to match new uses with old ones whenever possible: installing a restaurant in the refectory, a meeting room in the chapter house and hotel rooms in the old monastic cells (the bathroom is like a cupboard, with a lower height to allow for the perception of the interior space of the cell). The new functions requiring heavier infrastructures are located in the new constructions: the kitchen and the laundry facilities are installed in an underground volume and the 20 new rooms that were requested by the commitment are located in the new building (Figs. 1-3). By deeply understanding the typological, compositional, material, functional and symbolic principles of the pre-existing complex, Távora was able to design all the details himself (lighting, decoration, furniture), attempting in this way to incorporate the building's significance – in his words, 'a certain monastic austerity [was] revealed through a great economy of means and an extreme simplicity in the solutions adopted, both in terms of the spaces themselves and in terms of their treatment, decoration and furniture' (Távora 1985: 77).



Using a different approach, at the Convento de Santa Maria do Bouro (Eduardo Souto de Moura and Humberto Vieira, 1989–1997), the architects focused on preserving the strong image of the pre-existing ruin (freestanding walls with no roofs), and this was achieved in the intervention through the removal of subsistent plasters, the absence of visible window frames and the introduction of plain roof being covered with topsoil. Nevertheless, Souto de Moura rejected the simple conservation of the ruin, as he proposed its transformation through the introduction of new uses, forms and materials: the combined use of concrete and Corten steel slabs, technical areas and infrastructures, and very accurate details of thin brass window frames, while some stones were reused and moved to other places, although the cloister remained untouched as a metaphor for the contemplated ruin. The architect wrote as follows: 'I'm not restoring a convent, I'm building a hotel with the stones of a convent [...]. Recovering a building also means





FIG. 4. Convento de Santa Maria do Bouro, new building [at the front] and old convent [at the back] (photo by L. Ferreira Alves).

FIG. 5. Convento de Santa Maria do Bouro, bedroom with bathroom-cupboard (photo by L. Ferreira Alves).

FIG. 6. Convento de Santa Maria do Bouro, detail of window frame (photo by L. Ferreira Alves).

FIG. 7. Convento de Flor da Rosa, intersection between the new building and the old convent.

giving it an image [...] when you identify a building with a specific century, the restoration should accompany that powerful identity. Otherwise, I would have to choose a century, and for me the only possibility would be the twentieth century' (Souto de Moura 2001: 46). Unlike Távora, who added a new building to the pre-existing structure, which was thus preserved, in this case the ruin was manipulated and transformed, dissipating the physical distinction between old and new. As far as the functional strategy was concerned, Souto de Moura chose, where appropriate, to match new functions to old ones – installing a restaurant in the old refectory and kitchen, hotel rooms in the cells (in this case,

the bathroom-cupboard is a very interesting feature) – and, as in the Convento de Santa Marinha da Costa, facilities such as the kitchen and laundry are located in a new volume (which is almost imperceptible as it has the appearance of a retaining wall). On the other hand, the absence of plasters and the minimalism of the building's details and decoration, despite being an expressively contemporary approach, represent an attempt to evoke the bareness and simplicity of monastic life (Figs. 4-6).

Another example of the adaptation of a former convent into a hotel is the intervention by J. Carrilho da Graça at the Convento de Flor da Rosa (1992–1995). Here, the outcome was determined by the careful conservation of the spaces and surfaces of the old building and by the addition of a new volume that through its accentuated contrast with the former structure (expressed in its pure and abstract language) emphasises the legibility of the contemporary intervention (Fig. 7). The architect chose to place few functions in the old convent (reception, bar, lounges and a few suites) which was converted into a museum, and the new uses (restaurant, kitchen, services, hotel rooms) were incorporated into the new building.

Nevertheless, some of the conversions that have been carried out since the 1980s can be called into question: either because of an excessive affirmation of the new (the consequence of a more literal interpretation of the Venice Charter), promoting the prevalence of the architectural image to the detriment of the material and intangible values of the object, thus irreversibly erasing the traces of history; or because of an exaggerated minimalism related to an architectural trend that (sometimes uncritically) gives preference to the use of certain materials such as concrete, glass, iron, stainless steel or Corten steel.

### *Different uses*

As far as adaptive reuse is concerned, there has been a critical debate about the more elitist and monofunctional nature of the boutique hotels installed in disused convents: they are said to create no synergies with the surrounding territory and the local communities, as they are only affordable to the upper classes; their lack of sustainability is also cited, since these tourist structures nowadays have very low rates of occupation due to the economic crisis. On the other hand, reflections can also be made as to how these high-standard hotels can best embody the spiritual and ascetic values of the former structures.

Given this scenario, some other possibilities of adaptive, multifunctional and sustainable uses have been experimented more recently in Portugal, while also acknowledging the importance of involving local communities in the rehabilitation process. At the Mosteiro de Tibães (intervention coordinated by João Carlos dos Santos – DRCN, 1985–2007), the largest and most important Benedictine monastery in the country, the project team chose to introduce different functions such as the conversion of the ruins into a museum (with a medieval kitchen and refectory, etc.), parish hall, auditorium and exhibition room, residential facilities for a religious community, a restaurant, library and research centre and rooms for hire at medium-range prices (Fig. 8). Another important feature was the recovery of the old perimeter wall with an associated agricultural production (winemaking and the planting of other crops), the inclusion of a water and sewage treatment station, as well as the preservation of previously existing features, such as paths, gardens, chapels, stairways, fountains, lakes and so forth for the enjoyment of locals, visitors and guests. This was a complex and exemplary work that included a range of different actions: resto-





FIG. 8. Mosteiro de Tibães, new building (photo by L. Ferreira Alves).

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FIGS. 9a-9b. Convento dos Capuchos da Arrábida (photos by VMSA).

ration, conservation, the preservation of ruins and a new construction with a contemporary and abstract language (in some ways evoking the asceticism of the old monastery), respecting the typological principles and symbolic value of the monument.

Other recent examples include the Convento das Bernardas (converted into apartments, E. Souto de Moura 2010–2014), the Convento de São João de Arga (a hostel for pilgrims, G. Andrade – DRCN, 2013–2015) and the Convento Capucho da Arrábida (V. Mestre and S. Aleixo, 2012–2014). This last example is an interesting one because, given the absence of a sustainable use for the convent, the architects decided not to introduce a new function (for instance, creating another boutique hotel), but just to surgically consolidate the ruin with clay mortars, bricks and timber structures, preserving the structure's material integrity, strengthening the 'spirit of the place' through the regeneration of the ancient system in its relationship with the landscape (wall, vegetation, paths and hydraulic systems) and opening it up for the enjoyment of the local communities (Figs. 9a-9b). According to the architects, 'The safeguarding of the material consistency is thus based in its intangible significance. The permanence of the ruin now stabilised will be its transitory stage, allowing for its transmission to the future users and guardians' (Mestre 2014: 96). This is a challenging example which gives special privilege to the systemic relationship with the surrounding territory, rejecting heavy architectural interventions through the imposition of a generic use, and instead promoting their progressive conservation and the discussion about possible new uses, considering such matters as community-driven participation, the economic capacity of the owners and the future self-sustainability of the complex.

Current debate and practice on adaptive reuse in Portugal are thus determined by multiple types of intervention, which are also evident in the diversity of the lexicon that is used: 'recovery, renovation, rehabilitation, revitalisation, restitution, reuse, restoration,



conservation', etc. The expressions that are most commonly used are 'recovery' or 'rehabilitation', broad terms that can include different types of action (decided upon case by case) and the introduction of new functions, implicitly expressing a dialectic between conservation/restoration and contemporary intervention. Apropos of this subject, Alexandre Alves Costa has said: 'Today we tend to consider interventions on a case-by-case basis, so that the intervention strategy will be generated by each non-generalised circumstance [...] consisting not only of the expression of each author's individuality, but also the ethical undertaking to engage in a rigorous and exhaustive recognition of the building to be transformed [...]. The plurality of these terms and so many others that have been used recently is an undeniable indication of the pluralism with which our architectural culture has been able to approach any proposal for intervention'. The same author maintains that recovering a building means transforming it and using it: 'Not transforming leads to the crystallisation of the past, and the architect limits himself to constructing a mausoleum and to choosing the paths for visitors to follow, which end up explaining an entity without any life' (Costa 2003: 9–11). Finally, in this regard, it is important to underline the specificity of the Portuguese situation, where conservation/restoration (recovery/rehabilitation) has never been recognised with the same level of disciplinary autonomy as it has, for instance, in Italy or France.

### **Didactic experiences**

The adaptive reuse of old and disused convents is an exercise that is frequently performed at Portuguese universities in the architectural design studio or in theses for Master's and PhD degrees. This subject leads to reflection about the territory as a stratified palimpsest formed over several centuries, as well as encouraging a critical approach to the theoretical, methodological and technical issues arising from interventions in

pre-existing buildings, involving different kinds of actions such as conservation, restoration, renewal and new constructions (Escola de Arquitectura da Universidade do Minho 2009). An important feature is also the debate currently taking place on the compatible and sustainable uses to be included in an existing structure, considering the 'spirit of the place' (ICOMOS 2008) and its specificities and values, as well as its relationship with landscape and local communities.

Because of their importance in the geostrategic organisation of the northern Iberian Peninsula, as well as their particular architectural features, monastic structures are of special interest for the training of students, since they make it possible to approach several important themes: the '*longue durée*' and its signs in the territory, the diverse possibilities of intervention in the ruin (either preserving or completing it), the transition between different scales (from the landscape to the detail), the principles of composition (such as geometry and modulation), the relationship between 'old and new', and constructive and tectonic issues, as well as a debate on the compatibility between new functions and pre-existent structures, considering also the embodiment of intangible values in contemporary architectural proposals.

The methodological approach involves combining available sources of information (documentary, bibliographical, iconographic, photographic, surveys, etc.) with direct observation *in loco*, considering the building as a material stratified 'document' – a palimpsest to be read, interpreted and transcribed. By considering the specificity of each case and the importance of a deep and rigorous knowledge of all pre-existing features, students are invited to develop several exercises of analysis and interpretation, using drawing as their research tool. Previous studies include: the principles of the territorial setting, different kinds of surveys (geometric, photographic, stratigraphic, constructive, decay mapping), the hypothetical reconstruction of the monastic complex (in different periods – medieval, modern, etc.) and its constructive evolution over time, metric and geometric studies, analysis of the convent's functional organisation and hydraulic systems, as well as a comparison with other monastic structures, among others.

These studies are developed in such a way as to improve students' critical understanding of the pre-existing structure in its multi-layered consistency, deciphering its intrinsic principles (compositional, symbolic, functional, constructive) with the aim of sustaining the architectural project for the adaptive reuse of the disused monastic complex. This previous knowledge makes it possible to understand the trajectory of the building's uses and the different phases of its construction, while simultaneously identifying the limits and potentialities for defining its new uses and a valuable intervention strategy (Figs. 10-12).

According to the Benedictine motto '*ora et labora*', the subject of the adaptive reuse of monastic structures confronts students with the dichotomy between a 'contemplative' dimension – with symbolic premises relating to the reclusive and spiritual life – and an 'active' dimension (Garrido 2009), relating to the strong productive character inherent in the function and subsistence of the monastic complex. The purpose of the exercise is thus to define a new programme that starts with the possibilities offered by the original building and seeks to adapt it to a new use, recognising that the contemporary enjoyment of such spaces is only possible with the involvement and participation of the local population. Students are also asked to consider questions of sustainability and self-sufficiency in their proposals, taking into account both the current context of ecological and economic concerns and the specific territorial condition of these complexes (often isolated from res-



FIG. 10. Convento de São Francisco de Real, evolution of the construction (CE-EAUM 2015).

FIG. 11. Convento de São Francisco de Real, geometrical analysis (CE-EAUM 2015).





idential areas, streets and public infrastructures). In this way, the challenge is to carefully comprehend the biophysical features of the place and its ancient subsistence systems, following the example of the former monks, who were able, in an intelligent and innovative way, to optimise their exploitation of the natural resources in a difficult terrain, of which the advanced systems of water supply are an important example (Figs. 13-14). This may be achieved, for instance, with the selection of passive systems or, in as far as possible, the use of renewable sources of energy (Ferreira, Neto 2015: 15).

Furthermore, this reflection on the adaptive reuse of monastic structures seeks to consider the specificity of the object as a 'monument', in the current broad acceptance of this term – built and natural, tangible and intangible – incorporating it into a contemporary understanding of the 'pluralistic context of modern multicultural societies' (ICOMOS 2008). Discussions about the broad and narcissistic character of the concept of heritage (Choay 2005) have highlighted the need to go beyond certain fetishistic or nostalgic considerations about iconic or enclosed monument-objects, in favour of a systemic interpretation opened to multiple contemporary appropriations and closely linked both to the territory itself and to the local community (Krakow Charter 2000). In this way, the didactic experiences of adaptive reuse invite students to interpret monastic structures in keeping with the local context, reconciling these testimonies to the past with contemporary lifestyles, and exploring new interpretations that can enrich their subsequent transmission to future generations.

### Final note

The examples and experiences discussed in this paper demonstrate the complexity of the issues involved and the multiplicity of criteria, approaches and solutions related to the adaptive reuse of monastic structures, from landscape to detail, considering both the tangible and intangible values of the pre-existing structures. These cases also show the importance of having a profound prior knowledge in a case-by-case approach, ensuring

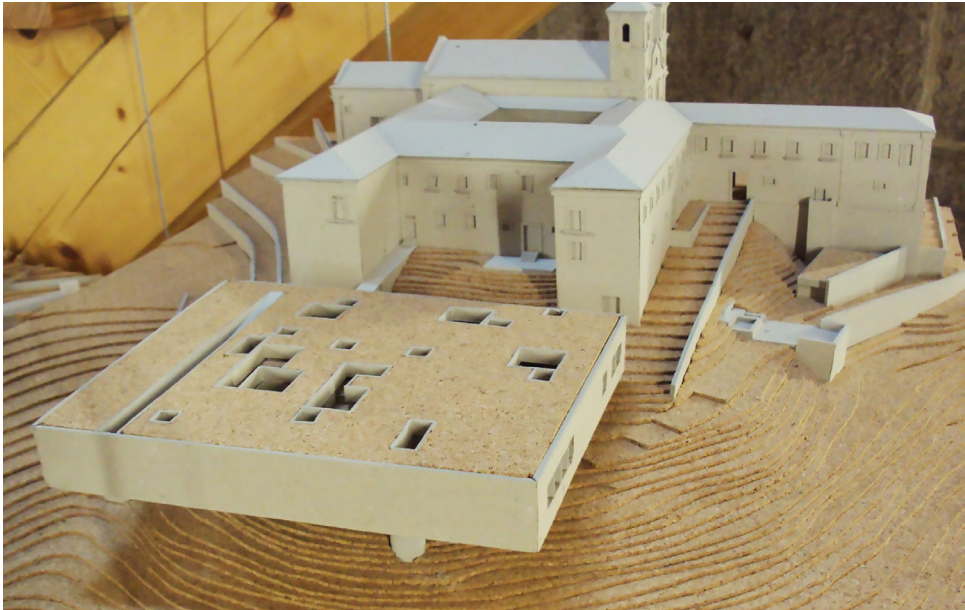
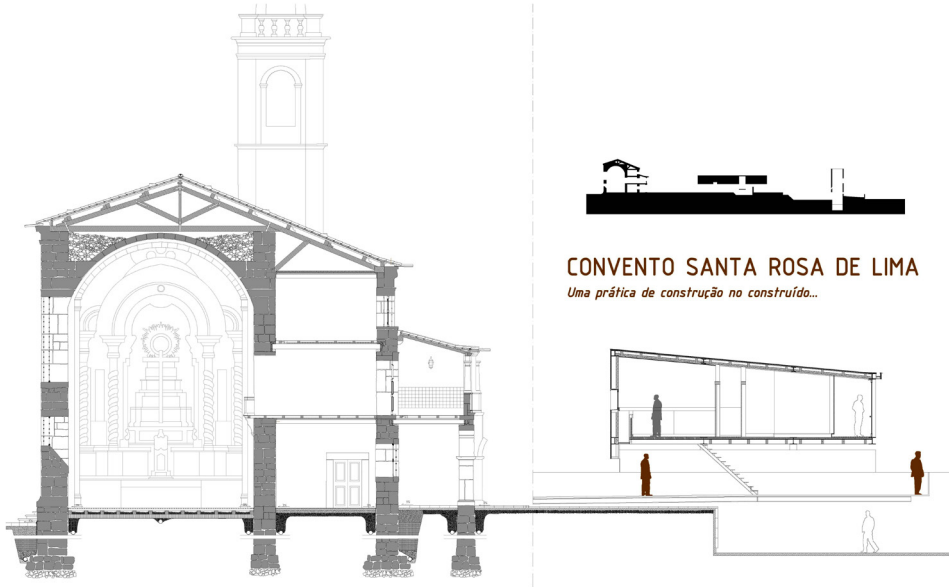


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FIG. 12. Convento de São Francisco de Real, functional analysis (CE-EAUM 2015).

FIG. 13. Convento de Santa Rosa do Lima, cross section of the construction between the old convent and the new building (by J. Silva, EAUM 2010/11).

FIG. 14. Model showing the new building and the old convent, Convento de Bustelo (by N. Campos, EAUM 2009/10).



that the design is in keeping with the building's aura, 'complementing not competing' (ICOMOS ISC20C 2011: 4). Hence, as Álvaro Siza maintains, interventions on architectural heritage should not be about the architect's own signature, but should instead focus on 'preserving the integrity of what already exists' (Siza 2011: 186–188).

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