Trace

Notes on adaptive reuse

N°3   On Collectivity
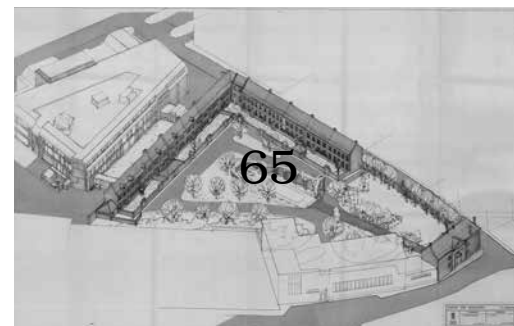
Adaptive reuse processes and the challenge of collective hybridity
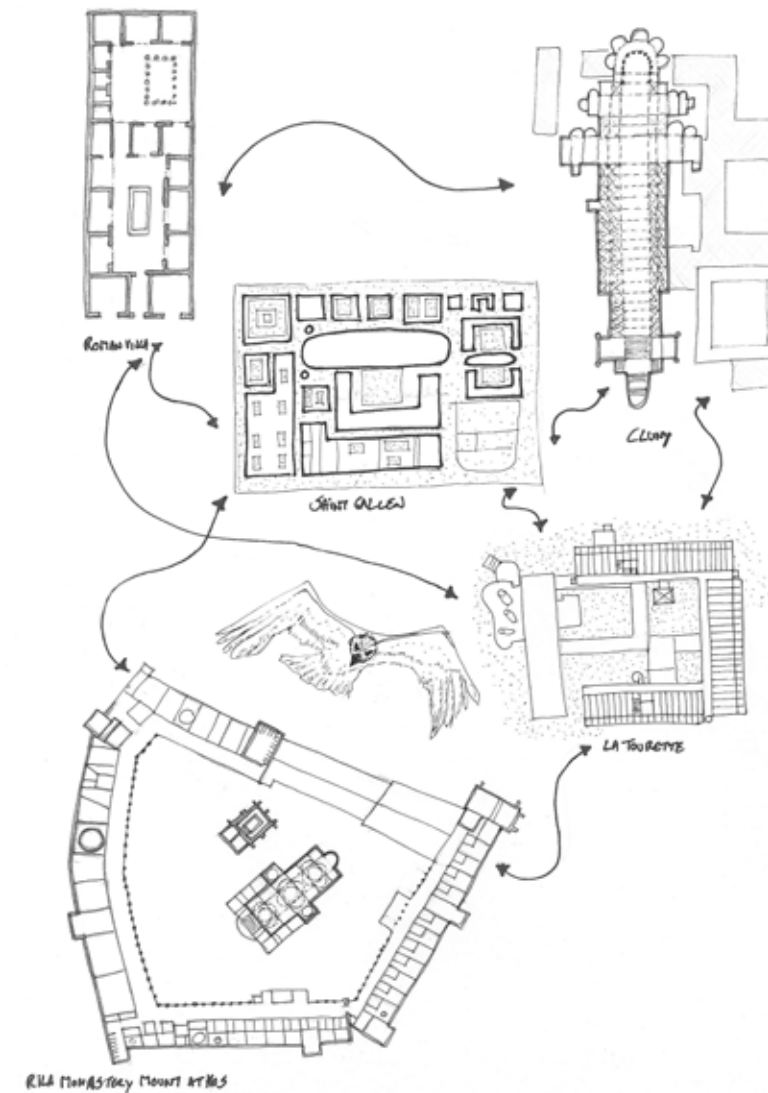
[1]   The monastic typology is heterogeneous, as outlined by some historically significant types of monasteries. Norberg-Schulz (1980) labels the Roman villa as the first source of inspiration for monastery sites along with the more amorphous Oriental monastery on Mount Athos in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, from which Christianity spread to Ireland and later Europe. Every historical architecture book includes Saint Gallen, Cluny, and La Tourette as representations of a monastic typology. The first is the unbuilt ideal plan of a monastery from 830. The second is the 11th-century starting point of essential monastery reforms to the most influential religious, economic, and political centres of their time. The last case formulates a modernist translation of monastic tradition by Le Corbusier. His *modulor* stipulates the dimensions of monastic spaces.

A religious community is woven into the monastic fabric by its surroundings, rituals, and the rhythm of monastic life. All decisions within monastic walls are traditionally made on a collective basis. Necessary consultation and cooperation create the specific conditions of use and transformation of monastery sites over time. The constant search of its inhabitants for ways of living together establishes the strength of the monastic typology. We can easily apply the Valletta Principles to this heritage as a collective good with spatial structures that express society's evolution and cultural identity.

The way monastic communities repurpose their sites whenever necessary provides an inspiring basis for reusing monasteries in a secularising society without losing oneself in an inflexible master plan. Integrated adaptive reuse processes are focused on relaunch rather than drastic change. Detection of this operating principle might help architects pass on this collective hybridity to present and future generations as an externalisation of heritage values.

Following Richard Sennett's (2008) argument about the importance of sketches in (architectural) study processes, I implemented this method to search for the spatial characteristics of the monastic typology. It is my way of looking for a balance between old and new, tangible and intangible, recognisable and unrecognisable. In the first part of this chapter, I focus on the history and evolution of monastic typology. In the second part, I propose six monastic anchors to deal with collective hybridity: spirituality, permanent collective living, hospitality, services, logistics, and cultivation. These anchors may be used to assess the evolution and previous adaptations of monastic sites and think about future reuse and transformations. The implementation of these six anchors is illustrated and discussed using three contemporary examples.

Adaptive reuse of monasteries and programme making

Although adaptive reuse is now an overall strategy for preserving architectural heritage, it is not a straightforward path. The heavy emphasis on age value and the material aspects representing this value can be considered a blessing or a curse. Any adaptation causes scar tissue and frayed edges, which can be concealed or shown bluntly. Furthermore, each action strengthens a specific skyline or, on the contrary, frays the threads of its underlying network.
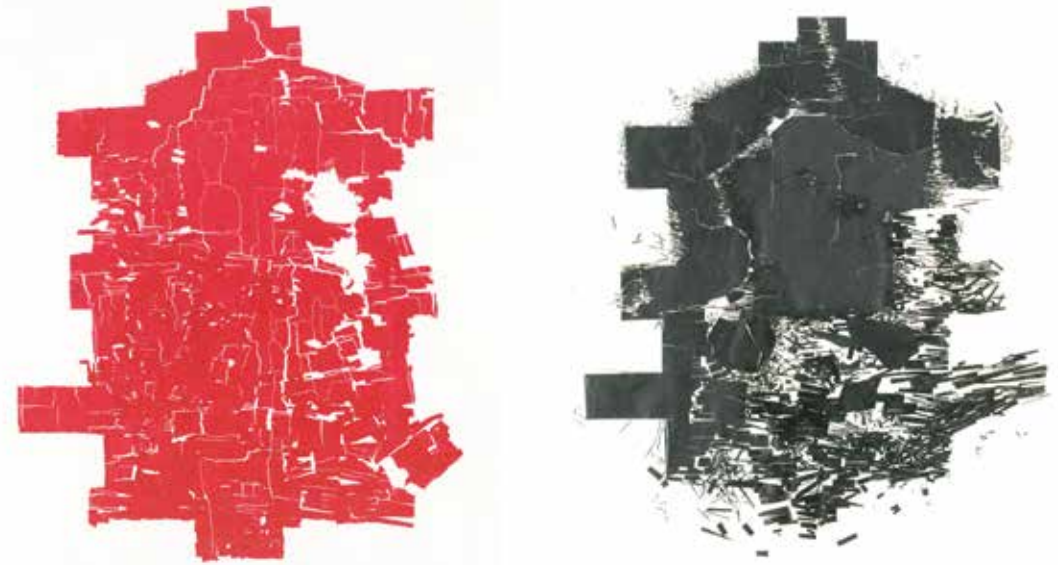
The work of the Argentinian artist Guillermo Kuitca serves as a visual metaphor for the evolution of this historic fabric. Kuitca is well known for his use of maps – particularly his transcriptions of topography onto mattresses – in the artist's words, 'to get lost… not to get oriented'. Starting from experimentation with aerial views of floor plans, Kuitca moved on to maps because he likes how they occupy a space somewhere between the abstract and the figurative. He uses ripped or torn floor maps in his series 'Theatre Collages', which perfectly shows cuts and bruises caused by age or human manipulation [1]. A red stain falls apart. White veins try to find their way through a formerly dense volume. Cracks and craters alternate as striking threads in a colourful carpet. A black wrinkled and a swept patch is cut up into narrow stripes from one corner, from bottom to top. His drawings seem to fall apart or to be healed, depending on the prejudice of the observer. Both works are an allegory of transience and revival simultaneously: they reflect both a fraying ruin and a re-interpreted relic; they depict extreme ways of thinking in a broad spectrum of behaviour towards adaptive reuse processes.

Kuitca uses a familiar typology to address our collective memory, to talk about loss and decay and to give them meaning. In his collages, he converts these seemingly negative concepts or emotions into positive ones. His poetic images display possibilities to the viewer, even the beauty of continuous change.

Similarly, I want to look at the religious heritage of mainly Western European Christian monasteries. Despite their survival of many past storms, monastic communities face one of their most significant challenges to date: disinterest in a rigid way of life based on faith. One could argue that monasteries operate with a hybrid programme governed by one goal: serving the Lord through prayer and daily work. Their attitude combines both an efficient and a spiritual approach. Tangible and intangible aspects are never far apart. Their premises are enclosed islands of peace and quietness, but they also are relics of flexibility and resilience through their 1,700 years of existence. According to the Belgian architecture critic Geert Bekaert (1991), the monastery is a complete house. A monastery is the archetype of life and thus also of both the most common and the most exceptional. Underused monasteries are, therefore, outstanding witnesses of evolving societies. Thanks to their consecutive inhabitants, these sites developed in a continuous and inconsistent process of adaptation and reuse. Their collective nature still has a significant advantage and appeal today.

This combination of flexibility and resilience also results in ambiguous monastic architectural forms. Monasteries come in all shapes and sizes. Never-

[2]   Theatre Collages. Argentinian artist Guillermo Kuitca makes collages with paper and other materials of speaking (heritage) sites. The same theatre, unravelling and reconstituting, is a metaphor of adaptive reuse: new and old support the nature of a heritage site.

theless, we recognise these sites as such by some typical puzzle pieces. Canonical law defines how a monastic community can only exist based on its members' total devotion to each other and to God.[1] Every religious house must have at least one chapel, so the Eucharist is the community's centre (Canon 608). Similar standards and guidelines do not tell us how we should build a monastic site. The relative vagueness of these canons leaves room for interpretation. From walled-in organised chaos in Ireland or Greece or a reused Roman villa in early Christianity to the strict schematic drawing of Saint Gallen, the dominant church of Cluny, and the perforated monolithic block of Le Corbusier in La Tourette, all these sites can be linked to the monastic typology. Despite their differences in age, materials, volume, and organisation, these religious heritage sites translate the same typological concept[2]: several architectural and programmatic elements recur at almost every site [2].

At different times and in distinct constellations, the main spatial character is shaped by monastery walls surrounding a group of buildings or rooms such as a church or chapel, chapters, refectory, kitchen, cells with an *oratorium* or prayer area, infirmary, guest house, library, scriptorium, service buildings, and almshouse (Uggé, 2014). Most monasteries are arranged around a church or a rectangular open space enclosed by an adjoining courtyard or clois-

ter. The manuscript plan of Saint Gallen from c.830 can still be considered the prototype of an organisational structure of a monastery (Pevsner, 1977; Norberg-Schulz, 1980). The church and monastic residence define the spiritual and spatial heart. This midpoint is surrounded by various buildings for supportive activities, such as guest rooms, stables for horses and cows, a pharmacy, or botanical and vegetable gardens. All these programme elements are based on both designed and vernacular interventions.

Different spatial and programme accents, which transcend the contextual, result from location, order or congregation, and age. In drawing [3], the proposed monasteries outline different starting points and phases in the monastery history. The Kellia and Carthusian monasteries represent an extreme form of contemplation or meditation due to their location in inhospitable places (Krüger et al., 2008). Monasteries in the tradition of Cluny and Citeaux formed self-sustaining villages in their own right, just like the Benedictine Saint Gallen. However, monastic orders such as the Franciscans and Jesuits, despite entirely different visions of earthly goods, prefer not to worry about real estate and oppose the concept represented by Saint Gallen (Lawrence, 2001). Nevertheless, the sketches show little straightforwardness in the spatial translation of visions. They hold

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1   For example, Canon 607: § 1 Religious life expresses as dedication of a whole individual in the Church to the wonderful union established by God, which is a sign of a future world. As such a monk or sister fulfils his or her total reliance as a sacrifice to whereby his or her entire existence becomes a worship service to God in love. § 2 A religious institute is an organised community wherein the members take

lifelong or temporary public vows according to their own law, which have to be renewed after a lapse of time, and wherein they live a brotherly life in community. § 3 The public testimony, which monks and sisters attest to Christ and Church, provides the seclusion inherent to the nature and goal of every institution. CODEX IURIS CANONICI - Codex van het Canonieke recht – Boek II Volk van God –

Instituten van Gewijd Leven en Sociëteiten van apostolisch leven – Instituten van gewijd leven – Religieuze instituten op Kerkrecht.nl

2   Karen Lens, Bie Plevoets, and Koenraad van Cleempoel, 'Conservation of monasteries by adaptive reuse: The added value of typology and morphology', *Stremah 2013, Structural Studies, Repairs and Maintenance of Heritage Architecture XIII,*

[3] The analysis shows both the importance and relativity of context in time, location, culture, and society to monasteries' architectural development in general. These drawings mainly study the relationship between the interior and 'internal' exterior spaces of archetypical monastic sites representing opposing ideas on monasticism.

Labels within figure [3]:

Balance between hermit & cenobitic life

Typical Carthusian plan drawn by Viollet-le-Duc 1856 Clermont France

4th Century Nitrian Desert Egypt

From hermit to cenobitic life

BENEDICTINE orientated > Stabilitas loci

No property No Stabilitas loci

13 - 15th Century Sacro Convento Italy

11th -12th century France

Opposing predecessors Return to 'base'

(designed +/- 830) Switzerland

Mobile army units

Courtyard - Cloister = Central Thread

12th Century France

16th - 18th Century Spain - Mount Zion College

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one constant: the cloister or monastery garden as a hybrid turntable for both daily and spiritual use, from hairdressing to processions (Klein, 2004).

Philosopher, essayist, semiotician, theorist, and literature critic Roland Barthes (2013) reflects on the ideal models of society and collective living. Different monastic rules and rituals are an essential angle in his considerations. He looks for a way of life between two extreme forms: an excessively anti-social form

like solitude or living as a hermit and an excessively assimilative form such as the (secular or non-secular) coenobium. Barthes names the fantasy of a free life lived among just a few people, or utopian monarchism, *idiorrhythm*. He defines *idios* as the pattern of a fluid element, an improvised, changeable form. At the same time, the philosopher ascribes a repressive meaning to 'rhythm' because it asks individuals to immerse themselves in a community's beat. He concludes that the most important aspect

that this ideal union offers to its inhabitants is the gift of space, both physical and in terms of time, as a counterweight to our hectic world. Barthes (2013) outlines multiple layers of meanings – both on the denoting and the connoting level. The world's complexities result from the fact that we can always break a thing down into its parts or search for other aspects that link with it to form a larger whole.

Monastic spatial elements are (re-)used because of their semiotic familiarity and the recoverable emotions attached to a specific monastic site. This tendency exceeds formal partitions and opposes strict modernist functionalism. Richard Sennett (2018) refers to Barthes to emphasise the importance of the visual repertoire from which poets draw. According to Sennett, 'improvisation, the application of variations on a basic form, requires more from the poet than the creation of an entirely new image'. The monk and architect Dom Hans van der Laan (1954, 1985) made comprehensive drawings for monastic clothing and architecture focusing on rituals. His patterns helped me identify the essential pieces of these monastic spaces in the spatial evolution of this heritage. He subdivides the distinguishable monastic stratification into a cell, court, and domain or – at a social level – into individual, family or community, and society. These identified tangible spatial elements are inseparable from the intangible social aspects of the hybrid monastic typology.

Philosopher Chantal Mouffe (2013) considers the monastic chapter an age-old model of deliberation, nuance, and even democracy *avant-la-lettre*. This

[4] Six monastic anchors applied to Saint Gallen, which can be considered the unreachable but inspirational archetype of the monastic typology. Red – spirituality / dark blue – collective living / light blue – hospitality / yellow – servitude / light green – logistics / dark green – cultivation.

relatively democratic, complex attitude, both level-headed and utopian, both agile and *idiosyncratic*, towards conservation and change, demonstrates its viability through history because it reflects modesty and nuance. Mouffe also points out the importance of opposing opinions and conflicts to be able to take new steps. She translates agonistic pluralism into the term *agonism*. This concept offers the necessary space and time for complex change processes, so a broad group of involved parties would support these modifications. The stones embody the integrated collectivity of a monastery in a hybrid way. At the same time, a collective view on how the rocks can be given a new start when the group inhabiting them disappears is essential.

Six monastic anchors: Translating the monastic nature

Spirituality
In these places, people come together to celebrate the Eucharist, to pray, and meditate. They want to experience sacredness together. This search can be linked or translated to other collective narratives or non-practical and binding goals.

Permanent collective habitation
This 1,500-year-old typology of collective living operates as a laboratory in which the natural tension between individual and community is translated into different constellations of balanced cohabitation.
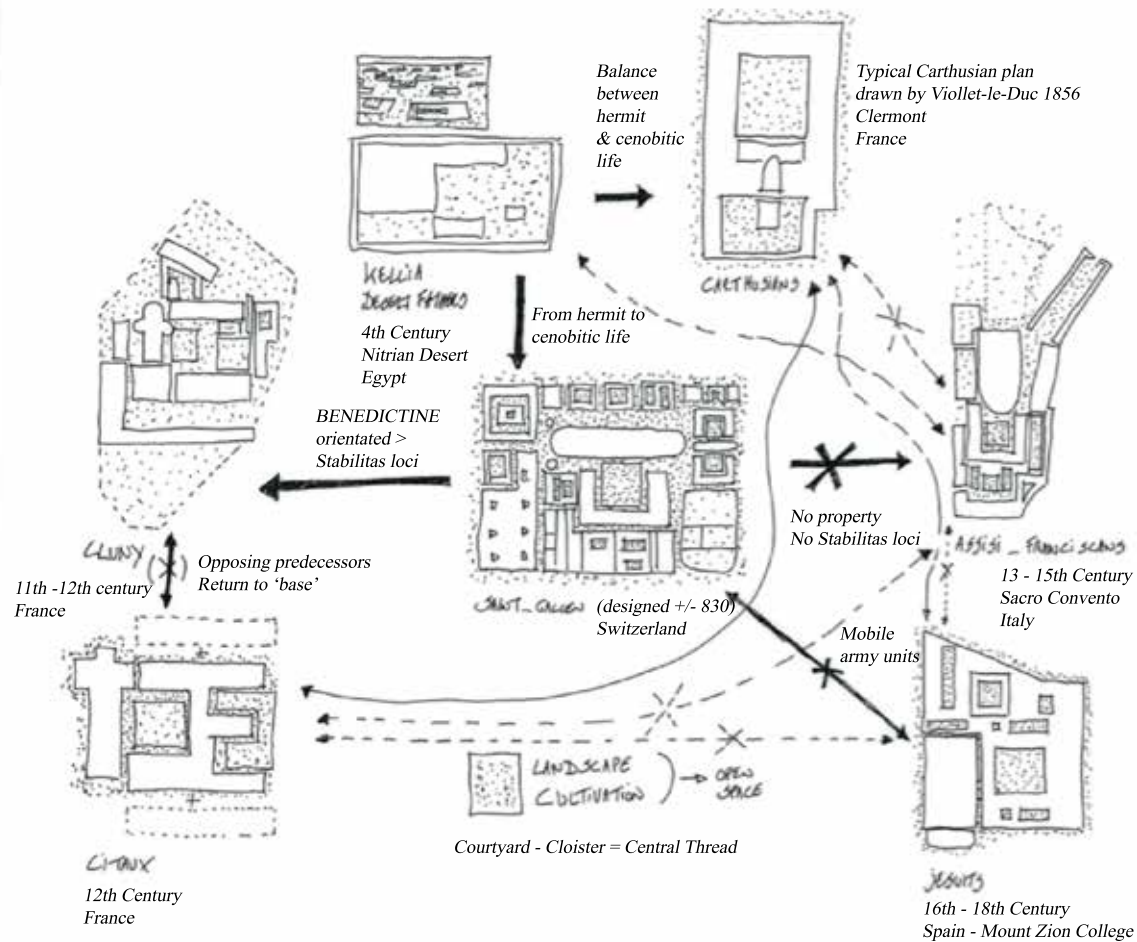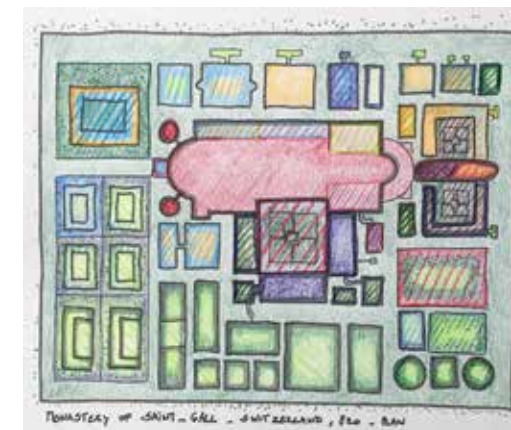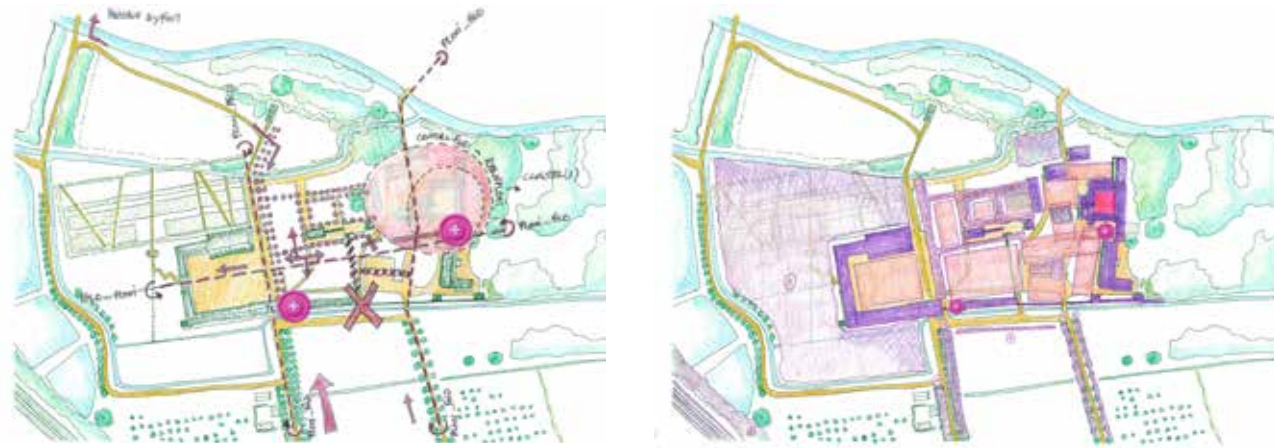
Hospitality
Every monastery incorporates some level of hospitality, often with a professional guesthouse for those looking for peace or a roof over their heads.

Servitude
Monastic tradition is open to education and cares for the sick, those suffering from psychological problems, the homeless (children), and 'sans papiers', among others. These spaces house scriptoria, libraries, museums, or collective services, which are developed alongside accommodation for societies or clubs, schools, and individuals, whether believers or not.

Logistics
A monastery has to be practically and financially independent. Religious inhabitants contribute possible incomes, wealthy guests pay for accommodation, and services can be (partially) paid. Nevertheless, breweries, sewing ateliers, (chalice) bakeries, blacksmiths' shops, orchards, vegetable gardens, mills, farms, carpentry, and other crafts ensure the maintenance of the monastery and its surroundings.

[5] Abbey of Herkenrode, Hasselt, Belgium, key plan and moulage scheme.

Cultivation

The landscape is not only draped around the outside of the monastic walls. Whether with or without a central cloister, the courtyards form a scenic chain of possibilities throughout the sites. Cultivating culture is applicable in all its meanings. The green, flourishing monastic areas are not only included to profit from their fertility. They give it space to breathe inside and outside the monastery's walls, ensuring a smooth transition between the surroundings and the quiet, more private, reflective monastic heart. The open spaces also offer room for experimentation. The central cloister is sometimes considered a reflection of paradise with a source of eternal life, creating a link with the first anchor: spirituality.

The monastic design of Saint Gallen was a guide for each new monastic community to follow, improve upon, or oppose – an example of the balanced use of the six monastic anchors. In three recent case studies involving monastery re-development, the anchors are deployed as an analytical tool and evaluation criteria. These cases are all situated in northern Belgium. They were selected because of their diversity in location, history, and approach: the Cistercian abbey of Herkenrode, the convent of the *Witzusters* – White Sisters[3] – in Antwerp, and the Premonstratensian monastery in Mechelen.

The first monastery was managed for more than 600 years by *des nobles dames de l'Ordre de Cîteaux du Comté de Looz*,[4] who made the site one of the largest and most prosperous nunneries. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, the site was confiscated and sold to entrepreneurs who turned the church and cloister into factory buildings. A major fire destroyed the entire centre of the abbey in 1826, leaving only
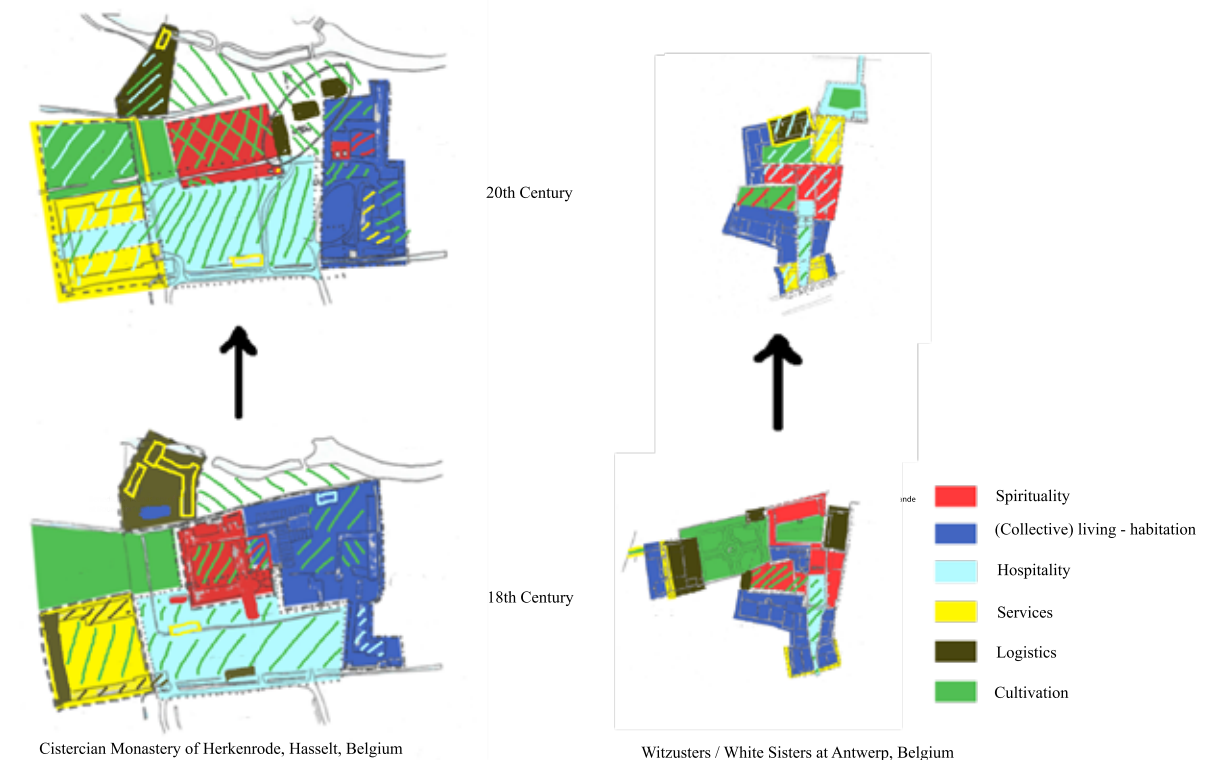
the service buildings and the abbesses' residence safeguarded. After 146 years, the Sisters of the Holy Sepulchre started the renovation of the ruins. They converted the old farm and residence into a new monastery with a reflection centre and a new church inspired by the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem in association with the architect Lucas Van Herck. Two decades later, the Flemish government started restoration work on the other side of the abbey (105 ha). The former stables, the coach house, the gate building, and the monumental barn have been transformed into catering services and an experience centre, highlighting the site's Cistercian history. The Flemish Department of Nature and Forestry curates the former surrounding monastic lands. The private organisation VZW Herkenrode was set up on behalf of the Hasselt municipality to increase the tourist use of the site, including starting a herbal garden. Simultaneously, the Centre for Herkenrode Studies was created to stimulate scientific research into the abbey. In the former church area, artwork by Hans Op de Beeck was placed in 2016.

Architect Herman Van Meer was responsible for the conservation of the abbey. He also designed the necessary changes for the new infill. Later this task was taken over by his successors at Team van Meer. However, Van Meer also had a vision for the interpretation of the new programme, and he developed a scheme that illustrates the spatial history of the site.[5] The motto of the Cistercian Order: *Ora et labora*, provided its base [5]. As shown by the architect, the spiritual bearer is the crucial piece in Herkenrode, with its ecumenical centre on the site's only preserved parts of the original monastery building. The spiritual bearer is the glue to hold the site together (Laenen and van Meer, 2012). Unfortunately,

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his concept has not been implemented, and the site was split into profane and religious sections rather than connected.

The second case is situated in the city rather than the countryside. The contemporary reuse of the White Sisters monastery in Antwerp, Belgium, is less ambitious in architectural terms. In 1312, the monastery was founded in a house in the *Cammerstrate* or Brewer Street near the Antwerp cathedral, in one of the city centre's oldest parts. The sisters lived according to the rule of Saint August,[6] wearing white habits that led to their popular name: 'White Sisters'. Their mission was to save 'fallen women' (in many cases prostitutes) and convert them into devout, 'God-fearing' women through charitable work. The monastery survived the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, iconoclasm, the Inquisition, and the Siege of Antwerp and grew steadily, buying adjacent properties and adapting the initial site. A plan from 1700 shows a monastery organised around two gardens. The chapel held a central position in a complex tangle of changing premises.

After the definite closure by Joseph II, the Catholic Charity Society of St Vincent de Paul bought the property in 1856. It turned it into their Antwerp headquarters, named *L'Espoir*, and a vocational school. On October 8, 1914, an incendiary bomb destroyed the chapel and some secondary buildings. All were rebuilt in 1921 in the same configuration as they exist today. During the 20th century, the school was closed, and the facilities were underused.[7] In 1986, the Christian lay community of *Sant Egidio* started to use some spaces for the care of the homeless, a home for elderly residents with dementia, a soup kitchen, classes where immigrants could learn Dutch, and youth work. After the neighbourhood around the monastery became one of the city's hippest spots, the community anticipated opening a coffee shop run by people with and without disabilities. Like the White Sisters before them, the community customised the monastery because of new needs towards very modest, almost invisible changes. The working budget was low, so the *Sant Egidio* members and their architect, initially Jo Crepain, needed to be creative and conservative

20th Century

18th Century

Spirituality
(Collective) living - habitation
Hospitality
Services
Logistics
Cultivation

Cistercian Monastery of Herkenrode, Hasselt, Belgium

Witzusters / White Sisters at Antwerp, Belgium

[6] Motivation of the six monastic anchors: Past and present 'zones' in Abbey of Herkenrode, Hasselt, Belgium, and Witzusters, Antwerp, Belgium.

3 *De Sorores penitentes beate Marie Magdalene* were named after their white habits, which were chosen according to the monastic rule of Saint Sixtus. They were also called the Sisters of the Holy Cross House.

4 The noble ladies of the Order of Cîteaux of the County of Looz

5 Team van Meer, *Masterplan abdijsite Herkenrode* (Hasselt: Team van Meer, 2010a); Team van Meer, 'Architectonische studie

– Onderzoek in verband met het realiseren van het Europees Trefpunt Wereldreligies op de abdijsite Herkenrode', 2010b.

6 Ordo Fratrum Sancti Augustini. 5th Century (translated by T.J. van Bavel o.s.a., *De Regel.*, 2005) Retrieved from https://www.osabel.be/NL/regel_l.php?id=2.

7 Antwerps Sint-Vincentius Genootschap, *Ons Huis* (Antwerpen: Drukkerij De Vlijt, 1931).

while consulting with fellow community members. In 2013, the Society of St Vincent de Paul bequeathed the entire site on the condition that *Sant Egidio* continues to use the premises for prayer and charity purposes, thus respecting the building's original programme (De Volder and Van Cleempoel, 2015).

The *Sant Egidio* community approach is fragmented and impromptu, but it was rewarding in the long run. The lack of means triggered a kind of spatial creativity, always with great respect to its central mission: a haven for people in need, mirroring its historic programme. It took them about 25 years to shape the building and its interior into a configuration that seemed appropriate. The same is partially true for Herkenrode. The sisters took their time to create a new monastery and spiritual meditation centre in the rehabilitated abbess residence. Initially, there was no direct public funding, while the Flemish government sought partners to develop the rest of the site. This discord resulted in a two-speed development.

In Herkenrode and the Witzusters, all six zones are still present at a tangible and intangible level. Even though the original community is no longer present, the sites are still alive because of newfound collectivity. However, at Herkenrode, the adaptive reuse process is faltering because of the lack of a collective vision. There is no common thread in the present hybridity. An appropriate and supported balance is more important than an equal presence. That is why I refer to monastic anchors instead of zones or angles of approach. These anchors ensure that a monastery can move with society through time and space without drifting too far from its core. The anchor points connect the tangible – the spaces – with the intangible, collective ideas of the 'living' community. In adaptive reuse, it is essential to consider these anchors and integrate them into a kind of charter in which all the partners strive for collective hybridity. The balance between the six monastic anchors can only exist because of the necessary discussions or chapter meetings to develop and follow the charter [6].

The Premonstratensian monastery in Mechelen is an excellent example of the importance of balance and collectivity. After work began in 1652 on the 13th-century city wall, the site received a larger church and several outbuildings. In 1796, again after a forced sale, a series of diverse programmes followed: a military training ground, arsenal, hospital, and barracks. Since the city took over ownership 45 years ago, nothing happened for decades, and the site deteriorated into ruin. Finally, a repurposing process to become a city library was initiated in 2011.

Korteknie Stuhlmacher Architects[8] won the subsequent architectural competition because they literally and figuratively left space around the corridor as a hybrid turntable and effective common area. The architects insisted on *weiterbauen* (to add a layer to an existing structure and system), as Sofie De Caigny states in *Architectuurboek Vlaanderen n° 14 – Wanneer ambities vorm krijgen* (2020). Their approach resulted not only in a sophisticated collaboration of old and new materials or forms. The architects have encouraged new generations of users to add subsequent layers without losing the character of the site. Like the previous projects, this process is unfinished. Through a hybrid interpretation of the pledge corridor across the different building levels and the church, the site can continue to grow alongside its current community. This one does not live within the monastery walls but around them. I dare to suggest that the cloister not only functions as a hub for the neighbourhood but also for the entire city of Mechelen [7].

Collective hybridity as a game-changer

It is not easy to provide clear contemporary examples where the collective character is respected and substantial new architectural additions are created. Several projects in which we, as the TRACE research group, were directly or indirectly involved, have encountered the complex collective hybridity of monasteries. It takes time and consultation to respect this complexity. The breaking point of the rescue of a monastic site lies precisely in the time necessary to recreate a collective story. Marienlof Abbey in Borgloon, the *Zwartzusterklooster* in Antwerp, the *Minderbroederklooster* in Sint-Truiden, the Trappist Abbey *Achelse Kluis*, and the Franciscan monastery *Roosenberg* are more or less in a difficult moment in their existence.[9] The monastic way of life functions as a laboratory. Its spatial and social components are both timeless and adaptable to current needs. Monastic heritage poses a challenge to both designers and researchers to go beyond the dominant logic of a master plan because of its inherent complexity and hybridity on a spatial and social level. Time to think and create is a decisive aspect, both in architecture and adaptive reuse, for making well-considered decisions that do not always have to result in significant interventions. The six monastic anchors are tools for building owners and architects to create this time. However, all parties have to be willing to be motivated partners in discussing the future of monastic heritage. Contemporary practice shows that collective hybridity or collectivity *tout court* is not evident.
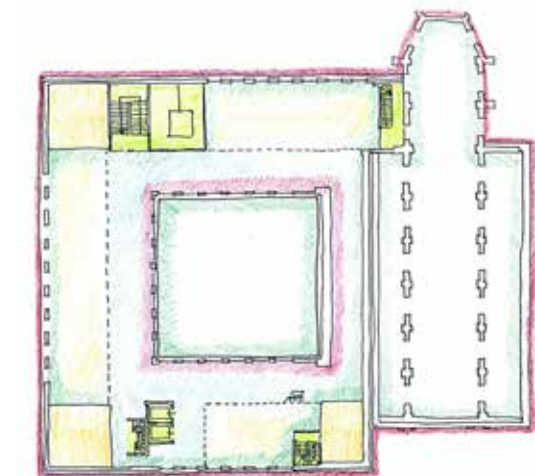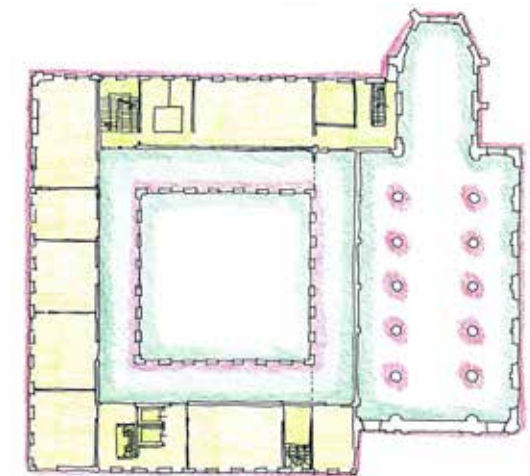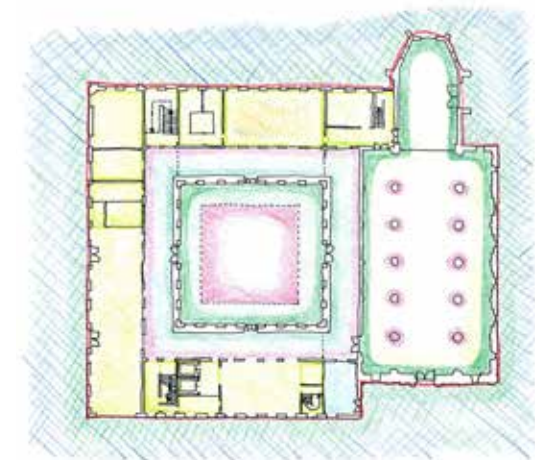
[7] Six monastic anchors applied to the Premonstratensian monastery in Mechelen, Belgium, which was adapted to a public library from 2011 to 2019. Red – spirituality / dark blue – collective living / light blue – hospitality / yellow – servitude / light green – logistics / dark green – cultivation.

In his book *Building and Dwelling* (2018), Richard Sennett compares a master plan and an approach based on farmers' wisdom. The former creates a closed system in which each place and function relates to the others. The second assumes that different colonies of the same seed will compete for resources and may or may not survive depending on their response to the context. The farm described, therefore, has a dynamic rather than a static ecology. With the descriptions above, I indicate the seeds and not a fixed structure. This approach is my version of planting seeds to determine the type of shape, without wanting to specify form and function, in order to create maximum space for variation and innovation.

'The community prepares to brave the night (imagine a countryside far away from anywhere, with no lights, so where nightfall really means the threat of darkness). Living-Together: perhaps, simply a way of confronting the sadness of the night together. Being among strangers is inevitable, necessary even, except when night falls'.[10]

8 In collaboration with Bureau Bouwtechniek and Callebaut Architects.
9 Karen Lens, 'What runs under your skin – The monastic link to co-housing', Paper presented at the Heritage Conference, Granada, Spain, 2018; Lens, K. and N. Vande Keere, 'The monastic landscape – Carrier of memory and potential catalyst in conservation and adaptive reuse processes of material and immaterial heritage', in

Archaelogia Hereditas - Preventive Conservation of the human environment 6 - Architecture as an element to the Landscape (Warsaw: Archaeologica Hereditas Works of the Insitute of Archaeology of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski, 2018).
10 To conclude, I quote Roland Barthes (2013), who describes his love for the idea of the monastic *compline* or night mass of religious communities like La Grande Chartreuse.

Colofon

UHASSELT
KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION