From Exclusive to Inclusive:
Reimagining the Castle of Heers Through Ruination

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This year has been an enriching experience and it has truly been a joy to be part of UHasselt.

Figure 1.1 *Ruinous condition of former dining room.*

Abstract

In an era when architecture often prioritises contemporary new constructions to keep pace with the demands of modern life, historic buildings are frequently overlooked. Yet, it remains crucial to engage with such structures through preservation and adaptation, despite the challenges posed by their outdated functionality. This issue is particularly evident in the case of castle typologies, which, having lost their original societal relevance, often fail to meet the demands of the present and gradually fall into a state of ruin. While castles were once conceived as symbols of power, prestige and defence - with fortified walls and a strictly hierarchical spatial organisation reinforcing social segregation and exclusivity - many now stand as architectural remains of the past. Despite a growing awareness of the issue, the repurposing of such sites often follows strict top-down approaches that tend to perpetuate the historical exclusivity of these spaces in another form, but do not consider the local context and community.

This thesis, together with the master's project, examines whether ruination can be expanded into an adaptive reuse strategy to transform exclusive historical sites into inclusive community environments. Situated in a rural area in Belgium, the Castle of Heers represents the described tension between past grandeur and present obsolescence. The research investigates both the castle's social structure and architectural fabric and attempts to redefine its function through a more inclusive spatial approach. Against this background, the thesis poses the following research question: How can ruination be reimagined as an architectural and social strategy to transform the exclusive site of the Castle of Heers into an inclusive place for the community?

Through a multi-layered analysis combining literature review, site-specific investigations and theoretical frameworks on ruination and inclusive architecture, the thesis identifies forms of exclusion and barriers to accessibility of heritage sites. These findings are enriched by case studies that examine community-centred reuse practices and architectural interventions rooted in inclusivity, openness and sustainability. In this sense, the thesis introduces a new perspective on the adaptive reuse of the ruin of the Castle of Heers – a perspective that challenges traditional hierarchies and top-down approaches and supports the (re-)integration of heritage into contemporary community life.

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0 Introduction

In an era when architecture often prioritises contemporary new constructions to keep pace with the demands of modern life, historic buildings are frequently overlooked. Yet, it remains crucial to engage with such structures through preservation and adaptation, despite the challenges posed by their often outdated functionality. This issue is particularly evident in the case of castle typologies, such as the Castle of Heers, the project site of the thesis, which is located in a rural area of Flanders, Belgium.

Originally conceived as symbols of power, prestige and defence, castles served both residential and military purposes, with fortified walls and a strictly hierarchical spatial organisation reinforcing social segregation and exclusivity within the system. However, through the forces of globalisation, modernisation and innovation, these historic structures have largely lost their original function and meaning within the local community. Consequently, the Castle of Heers no longer fulfilled contemporary requirements and fell into ruin, having long been detached from local needs and largely inaccessible to the public.

This thesis delves into the historical life within castles by focusing on the social hierarchy, the distinct roles of their inhabitants - primarily the nobility and the servants - and how these roles were reflected in, and reinforced by, the architectural layout. It examines how the built fabric not only mirrored but also regulated the social hierarchy of the time. By analysing the regulatory power of architecture, the research reflects upon the potential of abandoned heritage sites in a state of ruination. In particular, it studies how ruination can be seen as a condition that enables a reversal of such exclusive structures, by offering a socially and architecturally more inclusive approach that adapts heritage to contemporary societal needs. In this sense, the following research question steers the investigations: *How can ruination be reimagined as an architectural and social strategy to transform the exclusive site of the Castle of Heers into an inclusive place for community?*

The thesis is divided into several interrelated chapters. The first part covers an in-depth analysis of the Castle of Heers and its context, focusing on the social hierarchies that shaped daily life within the castle and tracing the process through which it became an obsolete structure. The second chapter explains architecture's form of regulation and critically reflects on the limitations of top-down heritage approaches, which often do not sufficiently challenge and question this power of architecture. In response, the thesis attempts to investigate new gateways to move beyond viewing heritage as a static object, waiting to be given a new fixed function. The third part presents a theoretical framework structured around the vast themes of ruination and inclusive architecture, attempting to analyse how these two concepts can be linked and how ruination could become a social and architectural tool for inclusive design.

Initially, the thesis focused primarily on the ruinous condition of the castle, the exclusive nature of its historical use and on how such a site could be made more accessible and inclusive. Yet, during the research process, it became increasingly clear that heritage and inclusive design are profoundly intertwined, especially through the lens of community involvement. This insight shifted the thesis' focus equally towards examining user-led and rather informal reuse approaches, often rooted in volunteering initiatives, where adaptability and community engagement are seen as crucial to heritage regeneration. Additionally, Brand's "Shearing Layers" concept (CESBE1x Circular Economy Built Environment, 2021) and Habraken's "Open Building"approach (Kendall & Habraken, 2024) provide valuable tools to relate these informal practices to the existing built fabric and circular design strategies.

To ground this theoretical insight, three case studies have been analysed in depth, outlining architectural principles and key takeaways for inclusive environments. While these projects neither directly correspond to the castle typology nor emerge from an identical ruinous condition as the Castle of Heers, they nonetheless offer valuable methodological insights into working with the existing built fabric. All three projects work towards the user and their spatial experience, albeit at slightly different scales.

For the master's project, a research-based design methodology is adopted. The examination of original architectural plans, archived documents and photographs, supplemented by two site visits, allows for a nuanced reading of the castle and its position within the rural context. These investigations inform the selection of the intervention area, with particular focus on the underexplored west and south wings. The material and spatial condition of these spaces and the entire ruin are primarily analysed through a photographic survey, including images captured by myself and by international architecture students who had previously worked on the site in earlier studios. This diverse body of visual material, authored by various anonymous contributors, offers a layered and multifaceted understanding of the site. Through this process, components with reuse potential are identified and mapped, and combined, suggesting possible activities responsive to the local reality. Drawing on this foundation, through historical and theoretical research and case study analyses, four strategies have been developed to guide the design process. These aim to promote an inclusive use of the site and support its capacity to respond to the evolving needs of the local community.

1 Context - Castle of Heers

The Castle of Heers is located in a rural area between the villages of Heers, to the south, and Veulen, to the north, both situated within the “Droog Haspengouw” region in the province of Limburg, Flanders. Surrounded by agricultural land, the domain encompasses approximately 20 hectares and includes the castle, a farm with stables, a tithe barn and a gatehouse. To the castle’s north, a landscape park extends to the border of Veulen. The park contains typical landscape features such as two ponds, a central lawn, footpaths and several orchards and old trees, while a parterre garden lies to the east of the castle (Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, pp. 7-38).

Figure 1.2 *Castle of Heers in its rural context and the surrounding villages Heers and Veulen, 2025,* by author.

Figure 1.3 *Representative north facade with adjacent park.*

The castle follows a classical layout. It is structured around a central axis that begins at the middle of the north facade, runs through the garden and extends into a forest path. The northern orientation provides vast views over the park, with the representative character of the building expressed in the choice of facade materials and bay windows in the east and north wings. In contrast, the castle’s west and south wings are more enclosed, facing the adjacent farm buildings of the domain (Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, pp. 11-20). These adjacent buildings form an L-shaped configuration with the “Tiende Schuur”, translated as “the tithe barn”, as the oldest and most monumental structure on the farm (Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, p. 27).

Figure 1.4 *Enclosed west and south facades.*

Figure 1.5 *The castle with the adjacent farm buildings.*

1.1 Historical Timeline

The castle evolved in response to shifting political, economic and military situations, as well as changing resources, available craftsmanship and, overall, changes in ownership, often linked to the preferences and means of the noble family (Lepage, 2002, p. 133). Despite various interventions, the castle's essential character - its late Gothic style with Renaissance elements - from the 15th century, has been largely preserved. Typical features of this architectural style include brick construction, slate gable roofs, massive corner towers and a classical inner courtyard (Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, p. 20). The building has had a long history of destruction, reconstruction and decay, as shown in the historical timeline hereunder. Particularly from the 21st century onwards – and likely even earlier – cycles of neglect and abandonment by the last owner have increasingly marked the site today, ultimately contributing to its current ruinous state.

(The data used to create the timeline was retrieved from the following sources: Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, pp. 9-12, 37-38; Herita, n.d.-b; Vrijdaghs, 2025; VRT, 2018)

1034

The **earliest recorded reference to the Lords of Heers** appears in historical sources. Despite this initial mention, there is strong evidence to suggest that the origins of the domain may date back to Roman times, with possible archaeological traces remaining in the subsoil.

1274

The **Castle of Heers was first referenced** in a historical document, signifying its importance within the medieval territorial landscape.

1328

The castle was destroyed by **fire** during a conflict with the prince-bishop of Liège.

1362

The **reconstruction** of the Castle of Heers was undertaken **by the Van Rivieren family**, reestablishing its strategic and residential functions.

1398

The original line of the Lords of Heers became extinct with the **death of Gerard of Heers**, marking the end of the first noble lineage associated with the domain.

Figure 1.6 *Brass grave plate depicting John († 1332) and Gerard of Heers († 1398), lords of Heers.*

1466

Another devastating **fire** destroyed significant parts of the castle. The rapid spread of the flames suggests that the structure had not yet been fully rebuilt in masonry, but largely consisted of timber elements.

1477

The **second major reconstruction** of the castle was initiated by the Van Rivieren family. This phase resulted in the architectural form largely preserved today - a late Gothic structure featuring distinct Renaissance elements.

- The south wing was constructed first.
- Subsequent additions included the east, north and west wings. These developments employed locally sourced materials, consistent with regional building traditions of the period.

(The data used to create the timeline was retrieved from the following sources: Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, pp. 9-12, 37-38; Herita, n.d.-b; Vrijdaghs, 2025; VRT, 2018)

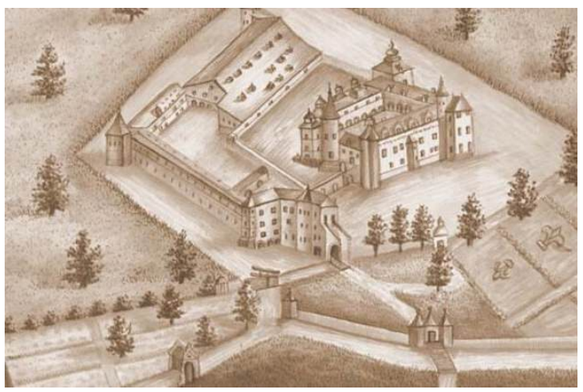


Figure 1.7 *Castle of Heers in its entity in 1641.*

The **tithe barn** was constructed, incorporating simplified Renaissance design features, serving both agricultural and administrative purposes.

The **southern stable wing** was built and **baroque-style roofs** were added to both the northwest corner tower and the west wing. These works were commissioned **by Hendrik Van Rivieren** and resulted in the full architectural configuration of the castle complex.

Charles François oversaw **an extensive modernisation** of the domain, which included

- the demolition of the drawbridge,
- the filling of the defensive moat,
- the redesign of the surrounding park in a landscape garden style,
- the artistic embellishment of representative interior spaces.

The Desmaisières family became the new owners of the castle through marriage. Remarkably, the family would retain ownership for nearly 160 years.

1584

17th century

During this period, the **west and south wings of the farmhouse** were erected, contributing to the estate's evolving agrarian infrastructure. Furthermore, the **gatehouse** underwent reconstruction, adopting stylistic characteristics typical of the Baroque period.

1621

1681

The castle was occupied by **German troops**, marking a period of external military influence on the estate.

1682

With the **death of Henri-Oger,** the last Count of Heers, the castle was abandoned and gradually fell into disrepair. Ownership was transferred to the **Abbey of St. Laurent**.

1757

Following the bankruptcy of the Van Rivieren family, the Abbey of St. Laurent sold the castle to **Baron Jan-Herman van Stockem**. Ownership was subsequently transferred to his youngest brother, **Nicolas Erasme van Stockem**, and his son, **Charles François**, who were responsible for much of the estate's present architectural form.

1770

1775

The Castle of Heers is shown on the **Ferraris map**.

Figure 1.8 *Castle shown on the Ferraris map.*

1859

(The data used to create the timeline was retrieved from the following sources: Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, pp. 9-12, 37-38; Herita, n.d.-b; Vrijdaghs, 2025; VRT, 2018)

Figure 1.11 *Structural collapse of the farm building.*

Figure 1.12 *New roof construction of the farm building for the installation of emergency roofs.*

Figure 1.13 *New roof construction of the tithe barn for the installation of emergency roofs.*

Figure 1.14 *Installation of emergency roof on the tithe barn.*

1876

The **gatehouse** was reconstructed once more, this time incorporating modest Neo-Renaissance features.

A comprehensive restoration campaign significantly improved the estate's condition, notably including the renovation of the representative north facade.

1887

By the end of the 20th century

The Desmaisières family could no longer afford the upkeep of the domain, resulting in the castle's progressive decline into **ruin**.

2000

A **structural collapse** occurred in one of the farm buildings, reflecting the estate's worsening condition.

2007

Despite the damage, the owners had not yet taken any restorative measures, and the site **continued to deteriorate.**

2008

In response to the ongoing neglect, the government intervened by seizing the castle and farm. **Emergency preservation efforts** were carried out, including the installation of temporary protective roofing.

2016

The **municipality of Heers** succeeded in acquiring some of the remaining **furnishings** from the castle, preserving a portion of its interior heritage.

2017

The **volunteer group *Heerlijk(heid) Heers*** was founded, beginning active advocacy for the protection and revitalisation of the site.

2021

The **Flemish government** formally acquired full **ownership** of the estate, marking a turning point in its institutional stewardship.

2022

The **non-profit organisation *Herita*** assumed responsibility for the castle's restoration and redevelopment, initiating a new phase of conservation and adaptive reuse.

Figure 1.9 *Decaying abandoned bedroom.*

Figure 1.10 *Plaster detaching from walls and ceiling.*

Figure 1.15 *Launch of volunteer group Heerlijk(heid) Heers.*

1.2 Daily Life & Social Hierarchies

The Castle of Heers was a fortified moated castle (Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, p. 10), which served primarily as the residence of the lord's noble family and his administrative and symbolic centre. It also acted as a strategic military base from which offensive attacks could be launched, and it became a place of refuge for the local population with their livestock, in times of danger and war (Lepage, 2002, p. 35).

Unlike many other castles on elevated terrain, the Castle of Heers was constructed on relatively flat ground, lacking the natural defences of hills or cliffs. To compensate, several man-made defensive features were added (Lepage, 2002). One of the most important of these features was the castle's layout itself, designed according to the so-called "neerhof-opperhof" structure, translated as the outer bailey-inner bailey configuration. The outer bailey mainly housed the estate's agricultural and service infrastructure, serving the everyday needs of the castle: stables for livestock, a tithe barn where provisions, fodder and fuel were stocked, as well as accommodation for local tenants and workers. In contrast, the inner bailey, surrounded by the outer bailey, contained the noble residence and reception rooms, with a separate area dedicated to the servants and domestic staff. A water-filled moat encircled the inner bailey, while a second moat surrounded the entire domain to prevent the enemy's entry. In addition to this configuration, defensive features such as the drawbridge and fortified towers, used for surveillance, observation and communication, became central to protect the castle's inhabitants (Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, p. 10). During attacks, security measures were increased, entrances were guarded more strictly, the number of sentries were doubled and became better armed, and the lookout for threats became a constant concern (Lepage, 2002, p. 57).

However, while this configuration brought safety to the domain, it also physically and symbolically separated the inner bailey, which housed the noble family, from the outer bailey and its farm buildings. Although visually connected and forming one fortified unit, with the drawbridge and gatehouse serving as the single access point, the two baileys were physically only linked by a narrow bridge (Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, p. 16). As residential functions gradually took precedence over military defence, living standards improved and greater attention was paid to comfort and aesthetics, however exclusively in the spaces dedicated to the nobility. Within the castle walls, hierarchies were reflected in the architecture, the usage of space, as well as in the roles, rights and activities of the different inhabitants (Wilczek, 2021, p. 352).

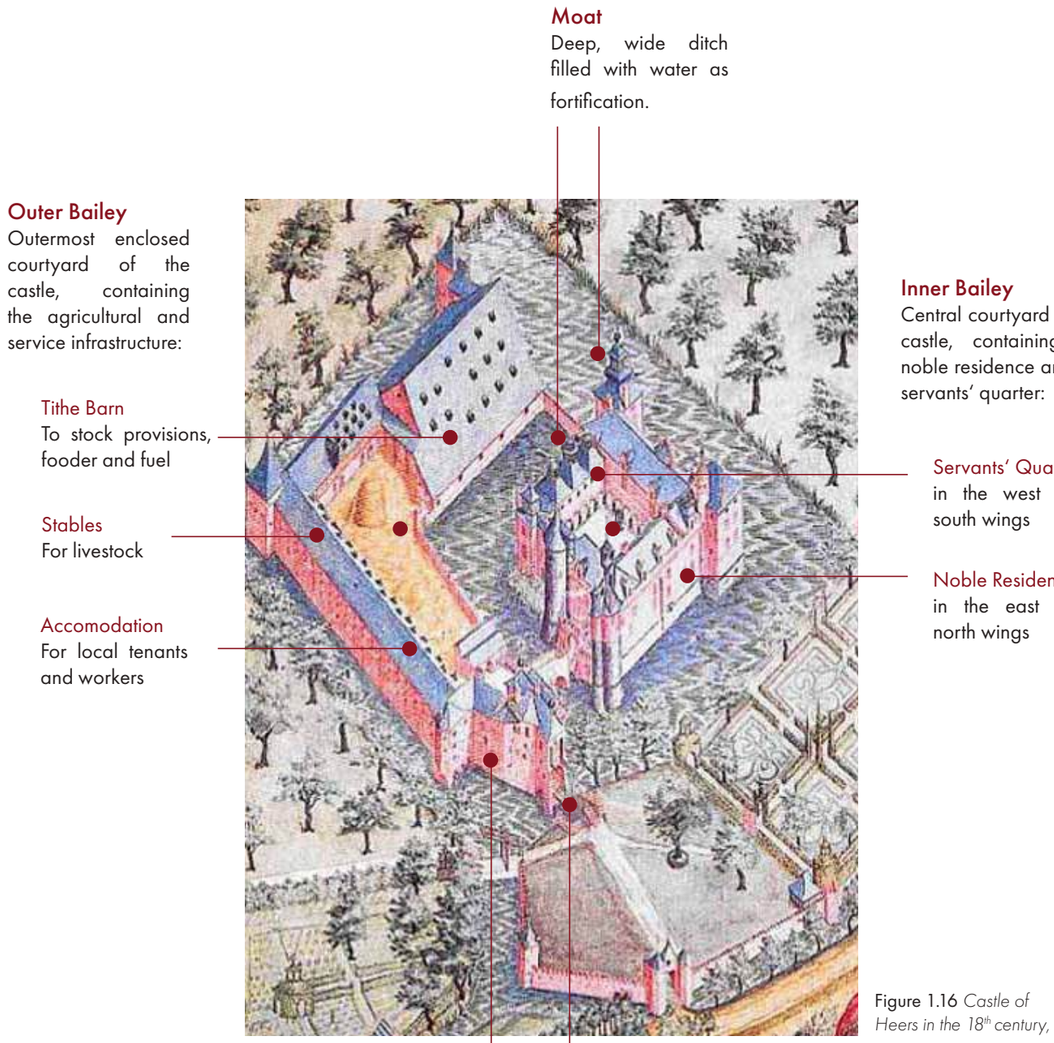


Figure 1.16 *Castle of Heers in the 18th century,*

Figure 1.17 *Dining room of the nobility.*

Figure 1.18 *Large salon of the nobility.*

Figure 1.19 *Vaulted ceiling structure of the basement in the castle.*

Figure 1.20 *Billiard room of the nobility.*

The more prestigious north and east wings contained the living quarters and reception rooms of the noble family. They featured wide corridors along the courtyard side for leisure walks and conversations (Lepage, 2002, pp. 127-128), large windows facing the garden and a representative staircase designed to impress (Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, p. 20). They were functional rooms used for dining, receiving guests and entertaining, but more often, they were performative, spacious interiors (Lepage, 2002, p. 127). The use of precious materials like oak and natural stone, even for structural elements, demonstrates rich traditional craftsmanship. Features such as marlstone or brick barrel vaults in the basement and red roof tiles on the prominent roofing reveal the wealth and aesthetic preferences of the castle's noble owner. Each ruling family left its mark, and stylistic features from different periods can still be identified (Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, p. 38).

This display of prestige and power extended beyond architecture and materials, and was equally reflected in the daily life and duties of the lord. His activities, highlighting both his elevated status and responsibilities, ranged from inspecting the domain and overseeing administrative duties to participating in tournaments or embarking on religious crusades. On a more daily basis, he would execute physical training, military exercises, horse-riding and hunting, all meant to demonstrate his strength and skill. Entertainment and time for fun were also part of noble life, when a group of performers such as jugglers, singers and troubadours were invited to the castle. However, these events were reserved for the elite and excluded servants and the common (Lepage, 2002, pp. 55-58).

Despite being part of the same feudal system, servants remained socially and spatially peripheral and isolated (Ludwigsburg Residential Palace, n.d.). With minimal contact to the outside world, their role was to ensure the comfort of the nobility, making "their master's life as comfortable as early medieval life allowed" and keeping the domain in a state of "quasi-autarky" and self-sufficiency (Lepage, 2002, p. 34). Jean Froissart, a French medieval writer, described this hierarchical relation already in the 14th century:

> "It is the custom [...] for the nobility to have great power over the common people, who are serfs. This means that they are bound by law and custom to plough the field of their masters, harvest the corn, gather it into the barns, and thresh and winnow the grain; they must also mow or carry home the hay, cut and collect wood, and perform all manner of tasks of this kind." (Feudalism, n.d)

Figure 1.21 *Harvest done by servants.*

Although all four wings are arranged around the same central inner courtyard, the servants' quarters in the south and west wings are far from equal, compared to the more prestigious north and east wings. These rooms, housing a kitchen, storage areas, a janitor's house and a working space, were small without any decorative features. Windows were minimal, facing only the adjacent utilitarian farm buildings and making the interior dark and poorly ventilated (Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, p. 20). The kitchen in the south wing was spatially separated from the dining rooms of the lord and his guests to keep smoke and odours at a distance (Lepage, 2002, p. 132). Servants carried out their duties as invisibly as possible. They were forbidden to use the official formal hallways or the courtyard and instead moved through concealed passageways and staircases (Ludwigsburg Residential Palace, n.d.). A narrow arched corridor beneath the courtyard linked the noble north wing and the service-oriented south wing (Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, p. 20). The activities, the spatial constraints and material modesty of the servants' quarters reflect the daily lives of ordinary people who worked within the system (Ludwigsburg Residential Palace, n.d.).

Figure 1.22 *Woman working in an enclosed space.*

Ultimately, while all the castle's inhabitants, including nobles, knights, stewards, craftsmen, soldiers and servants, lived on the same site and collectively contributed to the maintenance and survival of the domain (Feudalism, n.d), the differences in their lived experiences are nonetheless vast. While the castle's exterior may have projected a cohesive image of inclusive unity, the internal dynamics were marked by exclusion, hierarchy and deeply rooted inequality.

1.3 Castles' Obsolence in Modern Society & Opportunities

With the onset of societal transformation in the 19th century - the rise of modern nation states, globalisation and innovative technologies - the traditional function of castles as fortified residences began to fade. As feudal structures disintegrated and centralised governance gained prominence, the need for castles as both military centres and symbols of noble authority gradually disappeared (Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, p. 39). In the Castle of Heers, this shift became visible through ongoing adaptations to its integrated layout. For example, the southern towers of both the inner and outer bailey were demolished, the castle and the farm were given individual access roads and separated entrances, and both moats were refilled (Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, p. 16). In parallel, urban centres were expanding, offering alternative architectural forms and dwellings that provided comfort, safety and prestige without the need for a defensive layout.

Even though, it has outlived its feudal and defensive purposes, the Castle of Heers continued to serve as a noble residence well into the modern era for the brothers Michel Desmaisières (1929-2014) and Ricardo Desmaisières (1931-2011). However, their presence remained largely disconnected from both the estate's historical legacy and the surrounding community. Due to familial disputes and financial constraints related to maintenance, their properties eventually fell into disrepair. In 2012, Michel Desmaisières abandoned the site, initiating a period of neglect and progressive ruination (Herita member, personal communication during site visit, February 20, 2025). This decay reflects the broader societal decline of the castle lifestyle. Once desirable homes for the elite, castles have become functionally and technically outdated, imposing an ongoing financial burden on later family members who inherited the estate, often leading to such neglect and creating a sense of alienation between the domain and its surroundings.

Despite its state of disrepair, the domain of the Castle of Heers retains considerable value. Its authenticity, scale and rarity within the Flemish context, as well as the integrity of its built and natural elements, such as the historic oak forest and existing ponds, have led to its designation as a protected monument and valuable ecological landscape (Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, p. 39). In addition, over the past decade, the castle has received increasing attention and recognition from various stakeholders with differing and overlapping interests, including the municipality of Heers, developers and investors, the heritage foundation Herita and residents (Herita member, personal communication during site visit, February 20, 2025).

2 Analysis & Problem Framing

2.1 Architecture's Regulatory Power

Historically, the castle typology serves as a compelling illustration of architecture's regulatory dimension. Castles, as both fortified and elite residential structures, functioned as spatial instruments of power that visibly reinforced social hierarchies and control. Externally, the design employed a range of defensive features, such as moats, observation towers and drawbridges, not only as protective mechanisms but also as spatial barriers that sharply delineated who belonged within the castle grounds and who did not. Internally, the architectural layout materialised a strict hierarchical social order, clearly distinguishing between different groups of inhabitants: while the noble family, for instance, occupied richly decorated, daylight-filled and comfortable rooms with views over the landscape, the servants were confined to small, poorly ventilated spaces, with little to no visual or physical connection to the outside world (Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015).

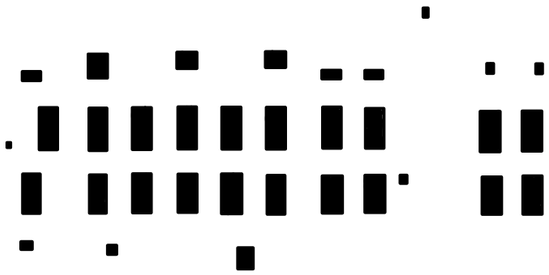


Figure 2.1 *Conceptual diagram illustrating openings in the east facade, 2025,* by author.

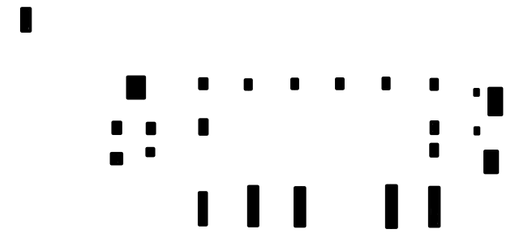


Figure 2.2 *Conceptual diagram illustrating openings in the west facade, 2025,* by author.

Across contexts and time periods, built environments have consistently acted as tools of regulation, structuring access, movement and interaction (Schindler, 2015). While being a social product and integral part of society, the built form also functions as a "medium" through which social roles, norms and systems are performed, negotiated and reinforced (Kibel, 2024, p. 35). Legal scholar Sarah Schindler (2015) describes architecture as a form of "regulatory power", noting that "[b]y structuring our relationships, these [tangible and intangible] features of the built environment control and constrain our behaviour". This power shapes how individuals relate to one another and the built fabric. While this socio-spatial regulation can lead to practical, organisational purposes and successful outcomes, Schindler's concept of "architectural exclusion" underlines the non-neutrality of built space. Architecture frequently facilitates access for certain groups while making it difficult or even impossible for others to use certain spaces (Schindler, 2015).

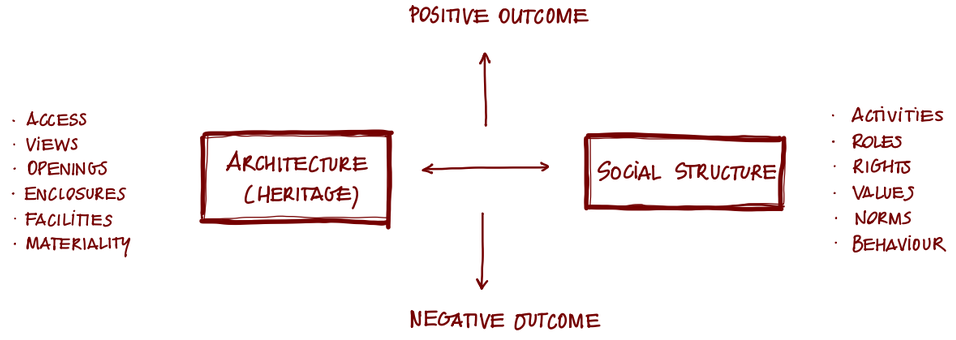


Figure 2.3 *Relation between architecture and social structures, 2025,* by author.

In some cases, such exclusion is consciously implemented, as seen in the castle typology or contemporary gated communities, surrounded with fences and often guards. These environments may enhance residents' sense of security while explicitly defining social boundaries, excluding outsiders. In other cases, exclusion may arise more unconsciously or unintentionally through poorly considered design choices and planning. For instance, when the driveway to a public building is paved with cobblestones or gravel, it may complicate or even hinder pedestrian access for elderly guests or wheelchair users. In both examples, architecture functions as a means through which society expresses its values and enforces hierarchies, while simultaneously shaping the users' self-perception and sense of belonging (see Schindler, 2015, for further examples).

This insight revealed the complex, reciprocal relationship between architecture and social structures. Furthermore, it is important to point out that, once established, exclusionary spatial patterns tend to persist and become difficult to dismantle. Through daily repetition and social habituation, consciously or unconsciously applied mechanisms of exclusion often fade into the background, going unquestioned, especially by those who benefit from them. In the context of adaptive heritage reuse, this enduring nature of spatial exclusion underscores the importance of disrupting historic forms of exclusivity. It requires flexible, long-term strategies that consciously reframe inherited spaces to support inclusion and accessibility, rather than replicating structures of privilege.

2.1 Heritage Management - Top-Down Approaches & Alternatives

Building on this dynamic relationship between architecture and the social order, it becomes evident that adaptive reuse strategies play a vital role in developing and rethinking the socio-cultural environment of a site. However, in a heritage context, such approaches often encounter resistance from authorities or heritage preservation policies, making adaptations to the built form difficult to implement (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019, p. 109). Consequently, many heritage projects remain driven by approaches that insufficiently challenge the regulatory power of architectural form and heritage practices. Among the most persistent barriers are rigid, centralised, top-down strategies that aim to regulate and preserve historic buildings while making them publicly accessible (Van de Bemdt et al., 2025, p.124). Paradoxically, such strategies frequently end up being major obstacles to effectively investing in heritage as a driver for development (Benkari, 2021, p. 3).

This contradiction is particularly evident in heritage practices, which are often driven by private developers or preservationist frameworks that prioritise profitability, resulting in the musealisation or commodification of cultural sites. Such approaches effectively transform these spaces into tourist attractions. Iconic examples, like the Palace of Versailles in Paris or Schloss Schönbrunn in Vienna, where visitors mainly come for the pomp of romanticised castle life, illustrate this tendency. Moreover, these models tend to associate castles and similar structures with high restoration costs and luxury-oriented redevelopment, risking reverting them into exclusive spaces that become disconnected from their original social context (Benkari, 2021).

Figure 2.4 *Visitors in the Hall of Mirrors, Palace of Versailles.*

When heritage is instrumentalised in this way, primarily to romanticise and commodify the past, it frequently overlooks actual present-day needs and systematically excludes certain societal groups, particularly, but not only, those with limited financial resources. As a result, citizen participation in the heritage discourse is constrained and access to its benefits becomes highly unequal. This risk is particularly acute for smaller-scale heritage sites located in rural or peripheral regions, such as the Castle of Heers. When local communities lose a sense of connection or influence over a site's future, they are likely to disengage and abandon these areas. In turn, this can accelerate gentrification processes, further marginalising vulnerable groups (N. Ritu, personal communication, February 24, 2025).

Despite these challenges, such a top-down tendency has nonetheless manifested in a list of proposed repurposing scenarios for the Castle of Heers, which was published in 2015 in a final report of a spatial redevelopment study by Erfgoed & Visie, a consulting firm specialising in restoration. The list includes exclusive and highly commercialised concepts such as a "destination hotel", "wellness resort", "exclusive offices" and a "business club" (Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, p. 71, [my translation]). While these visions may seem promising at first sight, they do not completely align with the municipality of Heers's primary goal of returning the castle domain to its residents. Instead, they risk idealising the castle's illustrious and prestigious past without examining the transformative potential of its current ruinous state.

In contrast to these exclusionary tendencies, emerging literature increasingly conceptualises heritage as an active, ongoing process, oriented towards both present and future, while remaining grounded in the past. This perspective emphasises that new spatial configurations are continuously being constructed through the selection and reinterpretation of specific historical narratives and elements (Martin, 2014, p.1115). In the case of the Castle of Heers, the architecture reveals traces of a long and varied history, with its changing functions, values, forms and materials reflecting these temporal transformations. Consequently, this process turns the building into a kind of architectural palimpsest. Engaging with this layered history requires both a sensitive understanding of the past and a visionary approach to the future (Martin, 2014, p.1104). As such, it is essential to make deliberate decisions regarding which historical layers to keep, reinterpret or erase. This necessitates a thoughtful and critical engagement with the site's social, spatial and narrative dimensions, alongside imaginative thinking on how its story can reflect shifting values and priorities in the future (Čeginskas et al., 2021, p. 492).

3 Strategies - Ruination, Inclusivity & Bottom-Up Approaches

3.1 Understanding the Ruin

Throughout history, the concept of ruination within the architectural discourse has been interpreted in diverse and often contrasting ways. Romantic thinkers like the English art historian and writer John Ruskin (1819 – 1900) appreciated decay as an integral part of the natural lifecycle of a building. According to him, the process of ruination should not be interrupted or reversed but rather embraced as an expression of authenticity and a visible manifestation of the passage of time (Ruskin, 1849). In contrast, contemporary theorists have begun to challenge this static, nostalgic view. Ginsberg (2004), for instance, offers a more dynamic and open-ended definition of the ruin, describing it as "irreparable remains of human construction that, by a destructive act or process, no longer dwells in the unity of the original, but may have unities that we can enjoy" (p. 285). This conception shifts the focus from a static finality to an ongoing transformation, framing the ruin as a site open to reinterpretation, continuous adaptations and new uses.

The Castle of Heers exemplifies such a transformative process. After decades of neglect and eventual abandonment by the last noble owners, the structure has deteriorated significantly and fallen into advanced disrepair. However, ruination should not be understood solely in terms of physical and material degradation. More fundamentally, it represents a "loss of utility", relevance and meaning in the present (Kushinski, 2016, p. 4). In this light, the process of ruination does not start with a crumbling facade or collapsed roof, but with obsolescence - in the case of the Castle of Heers, with the decline of the feudal system. Consequently, every architectural structure, by its very existence, contains the latent potential for ruination that unfolds over time (Bar-Eli, 2017, p. 22).

During a study visit in April 2025, Flemish architect Jan De Vylder, reflecting on his recent project "Chapex" in Charleroi, described the architect's role as an "entracte": a symbolic pause in the ongoing narrative of a building. Rather than imposing a new, definitive function on the building, De Vylder Vinck Tailleu in collaboration with AgwA, decided to strip away part of the facades of the existing structure and turn the interior into an open-air terrace, allowing it to serve multiple purposes. He continued arguing that architecture should never truly be finished. Much like a book, a building can be read, re-read, reinterpreted and rewritten over time (J. De Vylder, personal communication, April 4, 2025).

Figure 3.1 *Architect Jan De Vylder in his latest project Chapex in Charleroi, describing his role as an entracte.*

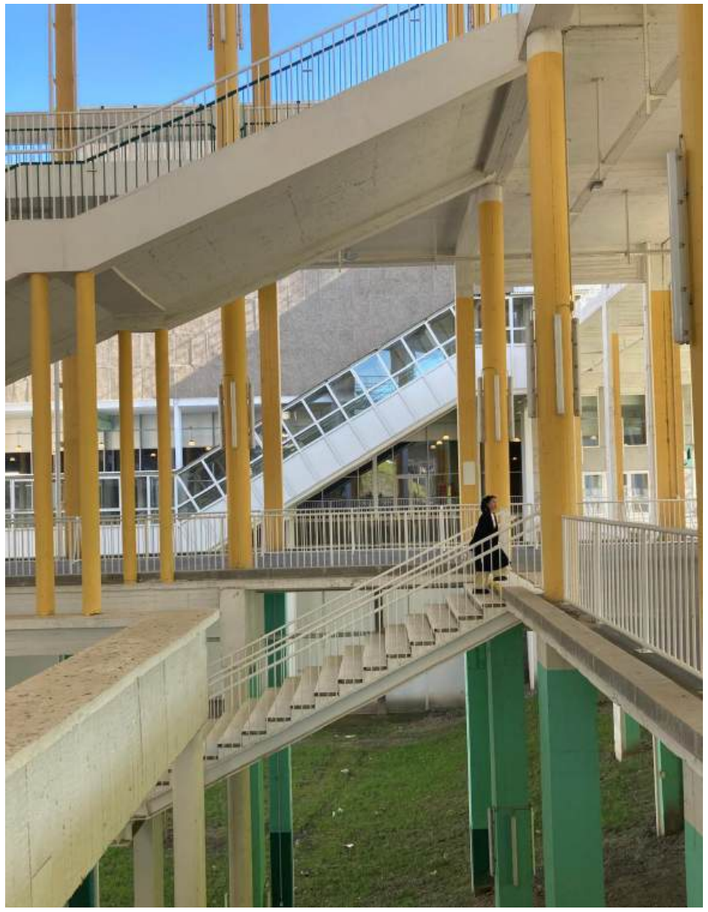


Figure 3.2 *Chapex, AgwA and architecten Jan De Vylder Inge Vinck.*

Applying his viewpoint on the concept of ruination, the ruin, too, can be understood as an entracte, offering an interval for reflection, reinterpretation and transformation between its past and its future. The entracte does not introduce the final state of a building, but rather a moment in a larger, evolving narrative. In this sense, similar to what Ginsberg (2004) argues, the ruin becomes an opportunity for creativity and invites stakeholders to reconsider a building's purpose and reimagine its future.

Figure 3.3 *Reimagining the ruin.*

Contemporary discourse increasingly positions ruins as dynamic sites of negotiation that are influenced by the tension between survival and collapse, decay and endurance, preservation and transformation. Ruins emerge as active agents in cultural reflection, stimulating critical questions and demanding decisions about which aspects of the past seem relevant and compatible with the present, how the past should inform the future, and which memories merit transmission across generations (Olsen & Pétursdóttir, 2014, pp. 11-12). In contrast to the earlier romantic ideal of preservation, current approaches embrace the functional reuse of ruins by offering society not only new opportunities but also the responsibility to engage with the past in thoughtful and context-sensitive ways (Armenciu, 2019, p. 221).

3.2 Inclusive Architecture

As discussed in Chapter Two, architecture exerts a subtle yet effective regulatory influence on the social dimension. Practitioners in the field of adaptive reuse bear a significant responsibility in how they wield this architectural instrument when reconfiguring historical structures for contemporary society. A fundamental question in this context, particularly when dealing with historically exclusive sites such as castles, is how, and to what extent, such environments can be transformed into inclusive spaces that welcome a broad spectrum of users.

Inclusive design, often referred to as "Design for All" (Di Ruocco et al., 2017, p. 1000), seeks to ensure that built environments are accessible and usable by everyone, "regardless of age, sexual orientation, gender, health conditions or impairments, or ethnicity" (RIBA, 2022). Human capabilities vary significantly across the population, but also throughout an individual's lifetime (Van de Bemdt et al., 2025, p. 110). The primary goal of inclusive architecture, therefore, is to accommodate this diversity by ensuring equal access to the built environment, including cultural heritage sites (Nilsen Ask, 2015). In recent years, this ambition has gradually begun to contribute to a cultural shift: a movement away from exclusive spatial typologies towards more adaptive configurations that consider diversity (Van de Bemdt et al., 2025). Achieving this, however, requires an awareness of changing demographic and socio-cultural realities and an understanding of the fluidity of user groups and their evolving spatial interactions with the built environment. As such, flexibility becomes a core principle of inclusive architecture that functions as an adaptable framework across time.

Figure 3.4 *Main entrance gate.*

Figure 3.5 *Single, monumental entrance.*

Castles such as the Castle of Heers illustrate the need for heritage sites to be reintegrated into contemporary contexts. Traditionally, castles featured a single, monumental entrance, often elevated, ornamented and protected by a drawbridge and guards. From the standpoint of inclusivity, such architectural formality and prestige may feel unwelcoming or inaccessible. Offering alternative entry points, through secondary, less formal paths and entrances, can provide a wider range of spatial experiences and foster a greater sense of autonomy in how users access and engage with the site. Even simple, modest interventions like these can significantly shift perceptions of openness and belonging.

Figure 3.6 *Decorative staircase in the Castle of Heers*

Figure 3.7 *Steep, spiral staircase.*

Figure 3.8 *Narrow corridor.*

Yet, inclusion must not be limited to questions of physical access alone. Equally important is the creation of environments that evoke inclusive feelings such as safety, comfort and belonging. Canadian scholar Edward Relph identifies such qualities as essential to what he describes as "insideness", a sense of being connected to one's surroundings (Relph in Seamon & Sowers, 2008, p. 45). Accordingly, accessibility should be understood not only as a matter of technical compliance but as a set of spatial and emotional conditions that ensure the dignified and intuitive use of space for all individuals (Soldano et al., 2020). In the case of the Castle of Heers, this implies a design approach that does not privilege a single user group, be it tourists or locals, but instead cultivates a more open, conceptually accessible environment, where diverse uses, identities and experiences can coexist.

Despite the increasing recognition of its relevance, designing accessible and inclusive architecture, particularly within the field of heritage preservation, remains one of the central challenges of the 21st century. The key question lies in how the imperative for inclusive, accessible spaces can be reconciled with the preservation of historical authenticity. This concern frequently generates tension in the domain of heritage architecture. Efforts to improve accessibility often clash with the interests of conservation and restoration authorities, who aim to safeguard the material and symbolic integrity of heritage structures. Many such buildings, including castles, present specific spatial constraints. Since they were conceived in times where notions of inclusivity - let alone inclusive architecture - were not a consideration, they embody outdated spatial paradigms and reflect social hierarchies that conflict with contemporary notions of accessibility and equity (Van de Bemdt et al., 2025, p. 110). For example, narrow corridors and steep spiral staircases complicate the integration of essential vertical circulation systems, such as elevators or ramps. Moreover, these architectural elements are often of high material and artistic value and are, due to their craftsmanship, viewed as integral to the site's historic character. From a conservationist perspective, altering or completely demolishing them is seen as potentially damaging to both the physical and symbolic integrity of the building.

Nonetheless, the exclusionary nature of such structures also highlights the urgency of rethinking them as inclusive frameworks for collective engagement. Promoting inclusion within heritage sites must therefore be regarded as equally important as the act of preserving and reactivating their material authenticity and historical significance (Nilsen Ask, 2015). Although adapting such sites to contemporary needs is often a complex and time-consuming undertaking (Van de Bemdt et al., 2025, p. 126), it is increasingly recognised that these challenges can be navigated through transdisciplinary collaboration and participatory design processes. These methods facilitate the inclusion of a broader range of perspectives, especially those of historically marginalised groups, and allow for more nuanced, context-sensitive solutions (Nilsen Ask, 2015).

Figure 3.9 *Guided city tour from a feminist perspective.*

Furthermore, inclusivity does not only emerge as a design goal but also as a critical lens through which architects must reassess their assumptions, positionalities and the cultural biases embedded in the architectural discipline itself (RIBA, 2022). An example of contemporary advocacy for inclusivity in architecture is the work of Apolline Vranken, a young feminist Belgian architect. She is the founder of "L'architecture qui dégenre" (translated as "The Degendering of Architecture), an initiative that interrogates how gender roles have historically been inscribed in architectural and urban forms. Through guided city tours, primarily led by women, the initiative reveals the subtle ways in which patriarchal norms are materialised in the built environment. Beyond raising awareness, the association also supports architects in developing highly contextualised spatial strategies by centring the lived experiences and listening to the needs of marginalised groups. Vranken's work exemplifies a critical, intersectional approach that challenges the male-dominated narratives of architectural history and practice (L'architecture qui dégenre, n.d.).

3.3 Ruination as an Architectural and Social Strategy for Inclusivity

After having examined the notion of ruination on the one hand, and the principles of inclusive architecture on the other, this section seeks to interweave these two concepts. More specifically, it investigates how ruination might serve as a tool for reimagining societal structures by engaging with the remnants of the built environment in more inclusive ways. The aim is to demonstrate how processes of architectural decay can help advance values such as justice, solidarity and the recognition of diverse social groups. When a structure is no longer maintained, abandoned and subjected to the forces of time and nature, its original function and symbolic authority gradually diminish. Even the most enduring architectural typologies, such as castles, ultimately fall into disrepair.

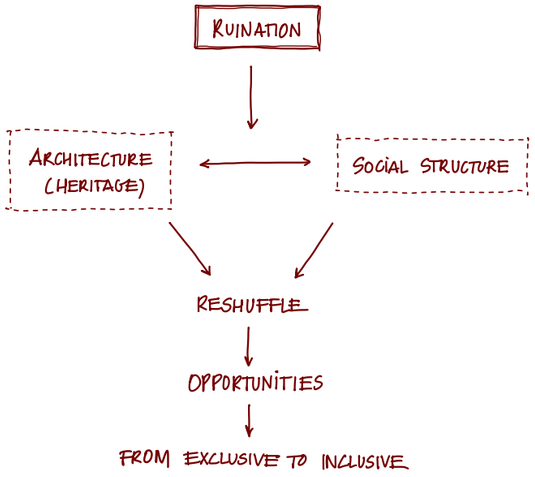


Figure 3.10 *Ruination as an architectural and social strategy for inclusivity, 2025, by author.*

In the case of the Castle of Heers, the slow but steady decay process has progressively weakened the building's original regulatory force. Each crumbling wall, broken window glazing, collapsed ceiling, and blurring of the boundaries between interior and exterior can be interpreted as a symbolic dismantling of exclusivity, rigid hierarchies and strictly codified social behaviour. While the traces of former power dynamics remain visible in the built fabric, their performative authority fades through the absence of daily routines and human control (Olsen & Pétursdóttir, 2014, pp. 11-12).

Figure 3.11 *The Castle of Heers falling into decay.*

Figure 3.12 *Collapsed brick wall.*

Figure 3.13 *Scaffolding supporting the ceiling.*

Figure 3.14 *Broken window glazing.*

Figure 3.15 *Abandoned salon.*

Figure 3.16 *Different historical wall layers exposed.*

Figure 3.17 *Nature taking over.*

Where once stood an impenetrable wall, new spatial opportunities may emerge – whether an informal entrance or a new window that allows natural light to penetrate previously enclosed spaces. These emergent openings invite a reinterpretation of the spatial logic of castles, softening their defensive, inward-oriented character and making them more porous and luminous. Such transformed relationships between interior and exterior suggest a potential shift from an architecture of control and prestige towards one that can evolve into a more welcoming and accessible space. Moreover, the dismantling of architectural authority through ruination contributes to a condition of symbolic and spatial ambiguity. In this altered state, buildings may be described as entering a "' [n]on-complete' condition": a fragmentary, imperfect and open-ended existence that stands in stark contrast to the fixed, programmed and aesthetically controlled nature of preserved architecture (Bar-Eli, 2017, p. 18). Left fragments invite multiple, even conflicting interpretations. By reassembling these fragments into new configurations, ruination becomes a methodological tool that generates new meanings and values (Guidetti & Robiglio, 2021, p. 16).

In this sense, ruination opens the possibility for spatial generosity. As the ruin loosens conventional formal and symbolic constraints, it offers a more flexible framework into which contemporary installations and inclusive infrastructure, such as ramps and elevators, can be more easily inserted. Through its gradual transformation, ruination presents chances that previously did not exist, among them the potential for a more inclusive heritage site.

3.3.1 Volunteering Work

Following years of neglect and abandonment, the Castle of Heers has, since 2017, attracted the attention of the volunteer group "Heerlijk(heid) Heers", a collective of residents from various age groups who have become actively involved in preserving the domain. The group has met regularly and informally to undertake clean-up efforts and initiate maintenance activities on the site (De Clerck, 2022). In 2022, the Flemish Heritage organisation Herita officially took over responsibility for the site and its future development. In contrast to the top-down vision proposed in 2015 (see Chapter 2.2), Herita adopted a more open-ended, participatory approach by intentionally avoiding imposing a predetermined long-term management plan. Instead, they embraced the grassroots activities already taking place and built upon them, while opening the site to the public. Today, Herita consistently collaborates with committed local and non-local stakeholders, including the Heerlijk(heid) Heers group, by facilitating direct engagement with the site through hands-on participation (Herita, 2022).

Figure 3.18 *Caroline Geerts explaining the volunteering initiative.*

The volunteers' sustained care and dedication is evident in the wide range of practical contributions they have made. Initial efforts centred on stabilising interior spaces, safeguarding historically significant objects, and making the castle visible again by cutting back overgrown vegetation and managing the park's neglected landscape. As a result, the park, as an integral component of the domain, has been reopened to the public (Herita member, personal communication during site visit, February 20, 2025).

Caroline Geerts, chairwoman of the volunteer initiative, emphasised that it is not only the physical preservation of the castle that motivates the group. Even more compelling, she notes, is the dynamic and inclusive atmosphere among the diverse group of participants: from retirees and youth interested in historic sites to those who are primarily drawn by the initiative's social dimension. These volunteer gatherings, thus, also function as informal platforms for dialogue, shared reflection, and the exchange and collection of local knowledge and ideas among community members (Herita, n.d.-a).

Through this ongoing initiative, Herita exemplifies a shift towards participatory processes and overall more inclusive heritage conceptions. Their commitment is not about reducing heritage to a matter of restoration or strict conservation alone. Instead, it affirms heritage as a key agent in sustainable development, social cohesion and mutual understanding across different stakeholder groups (Soldano et al., 2020). In doing so, Herita contributes to the early formation of a more inclusive society by raising awareness of Flemish heritage and reinforcing its significance as both an important economic and social resource. Cultural heritage, in this sense, becomes a tool for dialogue, community formation and a sense of shared responsibility (Frenda et al., 2020, p. 2). Initiatives led by volunteers such as Heerlijk(heid) Heers often become solid foundations for contemporary heritage management and demonstrate the value and effectiveness of informal, bottom-up approaches.

Figure 3.19 *Diverse group of volunteers.*

Figure 3.20 *Castle domain open to the public during the fair of Heers.*

Figure 3.21 *Gathering after a Sunday of volunteering.*

3.3.2 Informal, User-led & Botton-Up Approaches

Research has demonstrated a fundamental human need to establish meaningful connections with significant places, such as heritage sites, in order to overcome the experience of "placelessness" that is frequently associated with ruins or abandoned buildings (Relph in Seamon & Sowers, 2008, p. 43). Transforming such sites from neglected ruins into spaces for people is most effectively achieved by empowering diverse social groups to actively engage and inhabit them according to their own needs (Seamon & Sowers, 2008, p. 43). In Heers, for instance, the volunteer group adapted the site through pragmatic interventions: they installed a small catering container in the park, creating an adjacent seating area for communal meals and repurposed rooms within the castle to store materials used for ongoing maintenance activities.

In many cases, the functional reuse of ruins does not emerge through conventional, formal architectural practices, but rather through informal and spontaneous adaptive reuse approaches. These bottom-up interventions are typically driven by the immediate needs of users, rather than being guided by top-down design frameworks (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019, p.69). As such, community-led initiatives reveal the focal role of local populations as both primary investors and actors in the management of built heritage (Benkari, 2021, p. 3). These grassroots practices are grounded in ethical and inclusive principles, as each participant brings their expertise, priorities and skills to the process, often putting them immediately into tangible action.

Unlike predefined restoration projects that aim to fix and complete a structure by imposing a singular, predetermined, often idealised vision, informal reuse approaches actively engage with the fragmentary and incomplete nature of ruins (Bar-Eli, 2017, p. 22). These approaches reject fixed, monofunctional programs in favour of layered, often interconnected uses that expand the conceptual and functional horizon of what heritage can represent and accommodate. Given the collaborative involvement of multiple stakeholders and the reliance on minimal step-by-step interventions, these processes tend to unfold gradually (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019, p.44). Yet, this slow pace should not be mistaken for inefficiency. On the contrary, the notion of "slow architecture" is inevitably tied to inclusive and sustainable values. Being reflexive, fair and context-sensitive, it honours the site's history, its ecosystem, and the evolving socio-cultural dynamics. As such, slow architecture constitutes a high-quality, sustainable methodology that evolves alongside the users it serves (Gattupalli, 2023).

Nevertheless, the fragility of such community-based approaches must also be acknowledged. Despite their inclusive potential, such initiatives may be vulnerable to collapse and failure or, paradoxically, may trigger unintended gentrification processes by attracting profit-driven developers who begin to recognise the potential of the site (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019). Their long-term success frequently depends on strategic reinforcement through alliances with formal governance structures or organisations, such as Herita, capable of supporting and reinforcing their grassroots visions.

3.3.3 Working with the As-Found & Transformative Patterns

By adopting a laboratory-like attitude towards the built fabric, informal adaptive reuse approaches often work with the as-found of a structure. As contemporary heritage management continues to evolve, it must remain sufficiently flexible to respond to shifting social, ecological and cultural demands. In this regard, the "Open Building" approach, developed by Dutch architect and theorist John Habraken (1928-2023) and later adopted in the United States, offers a valuable framework. Habraken argues that for buildings to retain long-term value, they must first outlive their original use, as well as their interior divisions and service infrastructure, and subsequently be adapted (Kendall & Habraken, 2024, p. 109). Central to his theory is a critical distinction between the two components, "support" and "infill". The support refers to the permanent structural shell, a fixed, immovable framework, while the infill comprises the flexible interior systems and layouts, that users can modify, adapt and reconfigure over time to meet evolving needs (Kendall & Habraken, 2024, p. 111). In adopting a more inclusive approach, architects working with informal reuse methods are not there to impose fixed outcomes, but rather to provide this robust support that encourages user-driven transformations. The infill, in this context, becomes a flexible, ever-evolving system that accommodates dynamic, user-centred adaptations. Habraken's concept, therefore, advocates for a more open-ended architecture that aligns with a more inclusive conception of sustainability, encompassing not only environmental concerns but also cultural, social and economic dimensions of development. This theoretical framework offers a new perspective for architects to engage in the creation of inclusive and equitable built environments, while also positioning themselves within informal, user-driven initiatives.

Habraken's Open Building concept finds a parallel in Stewart Brand's influential theory of "Shearing Layers", a framework developed from the work of British architect Frank Duffy. Rather than treating a building as a singular, static object, Brand conceptualises it as a series of independent layers, each with a different lifecycle duration. These layers include: "site", "structure", "skin", "services", "space plan" and "stuff". While the site and the structure are the most enduring, with high life cycle durations, the more mutable layers are designed to be altered or replaced more frequently. The most transient layer, stuff, encompasses elements that are changed or moved on a daily or monthly basis. Brand argues that the different temporalities of these layers must be considered in the design process to ensure that buildings remain responsive and resilient across generations. Therefore, the concept of adaptive reuse must incorporate foresight for future needs and sustainability (CESBE1x Circular Economy Built Environment, 2021).

Figure 3.22 *Habraken's Open Building*, 2025, by author.

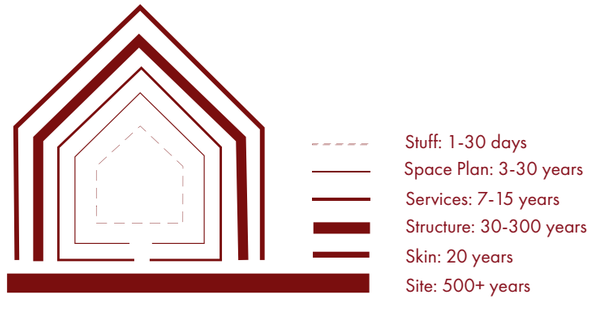


Figure 3.23 *Brand's Shearing Layers*, 2025, by author.

The Castle of Heers provides a relevant case study for applying Brand's model. The physical history of the building aligns with the idea of these varying layers of temporal persistence:

SITE

The geographical and cultural setting of the castle has persisted through centuries, with some features still identifiable in the landscape today, for example, the tree *Le Gros Platane*. However, the two surrounding moats had been filled in and erased, which altered the landscape's topography.

STRUCTURE

The foundational and load-bearing elements have undergone various transformations, including damage from fires in the 14th and 15th centuries. Despite these alterations, the structure has largely endured since the 17th century, only in the past decade experiencing significant decline through collapsing walls.

SKIN

The external façade and roof have been subject to various alterations, including, for example, the replacement of opaque doors with French doors. Over recent decades, however, the skin has deteriorated significantly due to prolonged neglect, abandonment and the ruination process. The outliving of the skin has become visible through the collapsing of roofs and the replacement with emergency roofs.

Figure 3.24 *Le Gros Platane around 1900.*

Figure 3.25 *Le Gros Platane today.*

Figure 3.26 *Enclosed west facade of the inner courtyard around 1900.*

Figure 3.27 *West facade fitted with French doors today.*

SERVICES

Plumbing and heating systems are now largely outdated or non-functional, making the place uninhabitable.

SPACE PLAN

The internal layout has shifted slightly over time, adapting to the changing needs of successive owners. These changes, however, have been relatively minimal and repetitive.

STUFF

Over the years, furniture, tools and artefacts have accumulated and been dispersed across the castle.

Drawing on Brand's "Shearing Layers", architecture becomes a time-responsive, layered system that reinforces the principles of circular design, and efficient and sustainable resource management. It provides opportunities for practitioners to work with as-found conditions and to integrate reclaimed materials, reducing carbon emissions (Armenciu, 2019, p. 223). Within this framework, the Castle of Heers, as a ruin, can be seen as a material library, included in the system of resource cycles. By transferring responsibility for the infill to users, the available stuff can be reinterpreted and repurposed (e.g. to fabricate furniture, accessories, ...), reducing waste and costs while breathing new life into the space. The ruin thus becomes a generative space for low-impact, informal activities. This demonstrates that user-driven adaptive reuse is not only a viable design strategy, but one that is rooted in sustainability, inclusivity and agency.

Figure 3.28 *Outdated plumbing system.*

Figure 3.29 *Storage area in the former servants' quarters.*

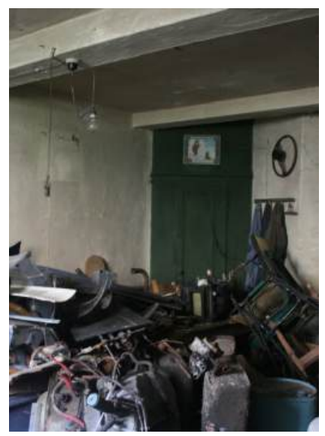


Figure 3.30 *Another room full of stuff.*

4 Case Studies

The following section investigates three architectural projects in an attempt to identify principles that may inform a more inclusive, dynamic and contextualised engagement with the heritage site of the Castle of Heers. These cases were selected to examine alternative approaches to heritage reuse that move beyond conventional, top-down preservation models. While they do not directly correspond to the castle typology or emerge from an identical ruinous condition, they nonetheless offer valuable methodological insights into working with the existing built fabric. All three projects work towards the user and their spatial experience, albeit at slightly different scales.

Each case study analysis is twofold. First, it examines how architectural interventions can facilitate both physical and social openness, enabling diverse user groups to access, inhabit and shape their environments. Second, it considers how interior interventions contribute to an inclusive atmosphere and flexibility. Although certain aspects may not fit neatly into these categories, they are nevertheless addressed where relevant to the broader architectural and social dynamics of the project.

The chapter seeks to offer a range of possible strategies for reimagining the future of the Castle of Heers. The selected case studies serve not as templates, but open a space for rethinking how architecture and reuse can support slow, inclusive and community-rooted transformation processes.

4.1 SESC Pompéia Factory Leisure Centre

Location: São Paulo, Brazil
Actors: Lina Bo Bardi, SESC & local community
Transformation: 1977 - 1986

Originally constructed as a drum factory in the 1920s, the building is today used by the Social Service of Commerce (SESC), a Brazilian non-profit organisation dedicated to offering social, cultural and educational initiatives to the local community. When SESC initially started using the site as their centre, the occupation was rather informal and unstructured, without a defined architectural vision or long-term strategic plan. At that time, the former factory was even being considered for demolition (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019, p. 132).

However, fascinated by the place's spontaneous atmosphere and informal use patterns, architect Lina Bo Bardi decided against the demolition in favour of preservation. Instead of clearing the ground for a new intervention, she chose to work with the existing fabric and expand upon the present informal ways in which users were already appropriating the space. Her approach transformed the site into a hybrid cultural and leisure centre that includes art and craft workshops, a theatre, a bar-restaurant and several flexible multi-use spaces (Sara, 2013).

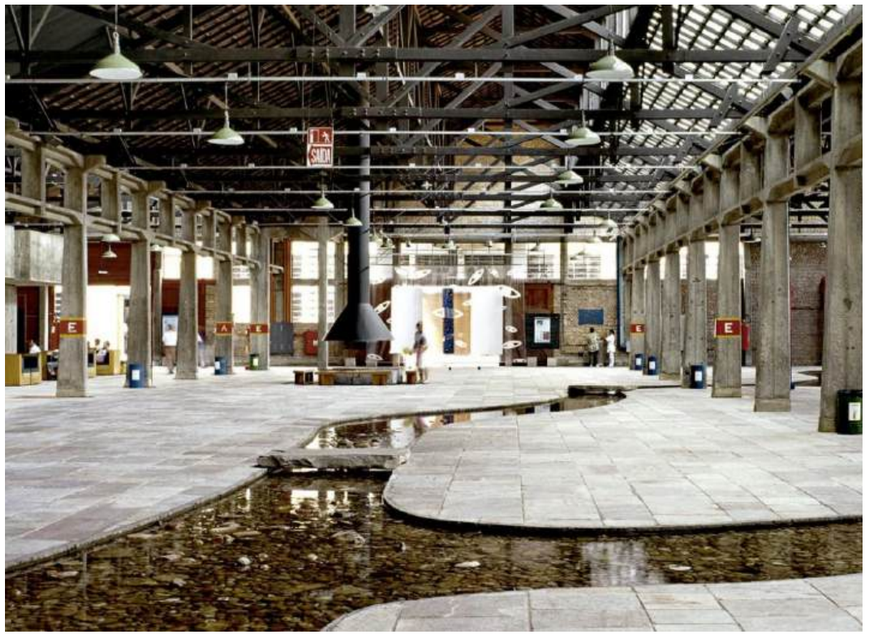


Figure 4.1 *Transformation of the former Irmãos factory into the new SESC centre Pompeia.*

Architecturally, the adaptation of the host space is very minimal. Bo Bardi stripped the plaster from the factory's interior walls, revealing raw textures and surfaces that recall a ruinous condition, giving the place a rough character. New additions were also kept simple and honest: concrete or other unfinished construction materials were used for permanent, fixed interventions, while smaller, more flexible features were introduced in brighter, livelier colours, such as red. Furthermore, she intentionally avoided keeping the building as a singular, homogenous open plan. Instead, she structured the interior to offer different levels of privacy and different atmospheres of use. Vertically, she introduced mezzanines as quiet zones for activities like reading or board games. Horizontally, partition walls defined specific workshop areas. These partitions, not extending to the ceiling, provide visual enclosure while maintaining acoustic continuity throughout the space. This permeable spatial configuration cultivates a sense of collective ownership and atmospheric cohesion. Additionally, to support adaptability, several elements were designed to be mobile. They are equipped with hidden wheels to move throughout the site, allowing the users to dynamically reconfigure the space (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019, p. 133). Overall, this flexibility encourages a layered occupation of the centre, where multiple programs and diverse user needs coexist.

Figure 4.2 *Mezzanine floor as a quiet zone.*

Figure 4.3 *Workshop spaces with partition walls.*

Figure 4.4 *Natural ventilation through wall openings.*

Alongside repurposing the original structure, Bo Bardi introduced three newly built vertical concrete blocks that house sports facilities, including a swimming pool, gymnasium and dance studios. These additions mirror the raw, industrial aesthetic of the factory, incorporating unfinished materials and natural ventilation through irregularly placed facade openings. These perforations also function as windows, visually and atmospherically linking the new structures to the existing factory (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019, p. 133).

Figure 4.5 *Three new concrete towers complementing the existing factory buildings.*

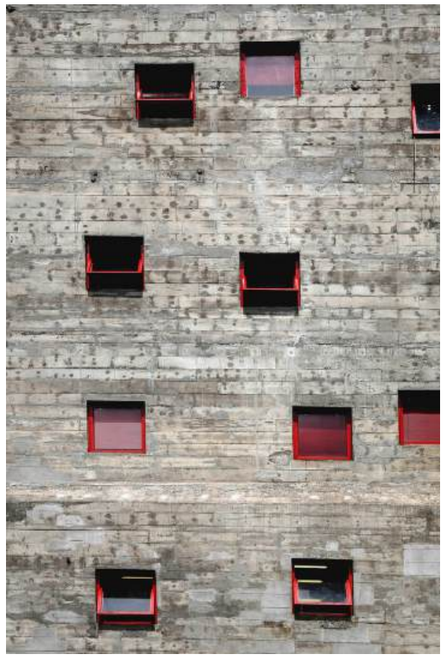


Figure 4.6 *Randomly placed red square windows on the tower's facade.*

Figure 4.7 *Library and communal space.*

Lina Bo Bardi's gesture of retaining and adapting the existing structure exemplifies a respectful and non-dominating attitude towards both the built heritage and its users. Her bottom-up methodology reflects an architecture not only designed for people but with them (Sara, 2013). She acknowledged and celebrated the spontaneous, informal use of space, translating it into an architectural language that supports and amplifies these social dynamics. When reflecting on her vision for architecture, during a visit to SESC Pompéia in the 1980s, Lina Bo Bardi stated the following: "Architecture for me is to see an old man or a child with a full plate of food walking elegantly across our restaurant, looking for a place to sit at a communal table. [...] We had a socialist experiment here" (Twentieth Century Society, 2021). Through minimal yet intentional architectural intervention necessary to support the site's flexible and evolving character, she created a socially inclusive space that bridges generations, social classes and cultural backgrounds (Sara, 2013).

Key Takeaways for Inclusive Environments:

- Recognition of informal user-led activities as foundational to the design process
- Non-hierarchical relationship between the architect and the local community
- Introduction of essential facilities that are necessary, and support or enhance user interaction with one another and the site
- Spatial units within the structure offering various levels of privacy
- Multi-functional programming to reach a wide range of users
- Passive design strategies, such as natural ventilation through wall perforations

4.2 PC Caritas

Location: Melle, Belgium
Actors: Architecten De Vylder Vinck Tailleu
Transformation: 2016

Throughout their practice, Architecten De Vylder Vinck Tailleu have recurrently engaged with themes of ruination, ephemerality and the inherent impermanence of architecture. These ideas are brought to the forefront in PC Caritas, a project that concerns the transformation of a neo-Gothic building, a former mental health care centre, into an enclosed exterior garden (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019, p. 46).

Figure 4.8 *Neo-Gothic building of PC Caritas, a mental health care centre.*

By the time the architects began working on the site, demolition had already started and several architectural elements, such as rooftiles, had been removed. Rather than attempting to reconstruct or restore the building to a prior state, the architects accepted and embraced this transitional stage of the building. They intended to remain as close as possible to the as-found condition, choosing not only to preserve this moment of partial destruction but also to reinterpret the building by extending the sense of openness and spatial freedom already present in the ruinous site (Architecten JDVIV, n.d.).

In a gesture that resonates with Lina Bo Bardi's approach at SESC Pompeia, the architects continued the stripping back process. Layers of finishes, wall segments and floors were removed to further expose the building's raw structure (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019, p. 46). Green-painted horizontal steel supports offer a counterpoint, giving the building a vivid, playful accent to the otherwise austere setting.

The transformation of the building's layout physically reinforces openness. Interior floor levels were partially removed, leaving only the primary beam structures intact. Window glazing and, in some cases, entire window frames were taken out, thereby exposing the interior to the influence of exterior weather conditions. Openings in the exterior walls, from the demolition process, allow light, air and views. At ground level, some windows were enlarged to reach the floor and now function as new entrances, dismantling the authority of the building's original main entrance (Architecten JDVIV, n.d.). These decentralised access points are treated equally. No threshold is privileged over another. This symbolically and physically reinforces ideas of openness, accessibility and inclusivity.

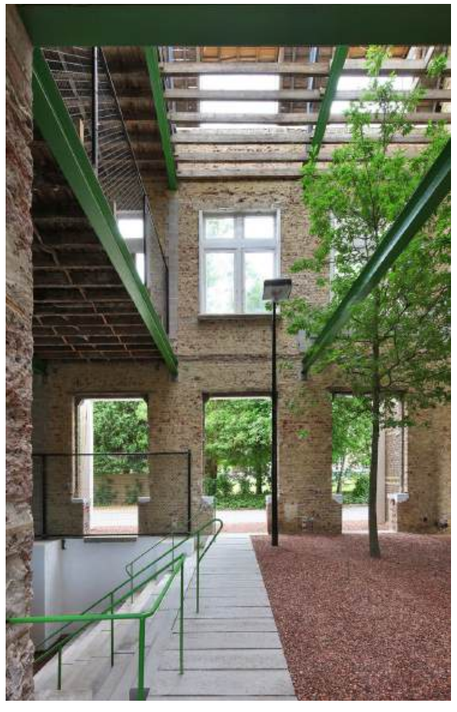


Figure 4.9 *Enclosed exterior garden.*

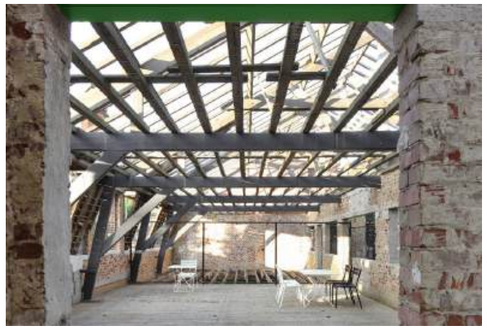


Figure 4.10 *Floor and roof removal.*

Figure 4.11 *Covered area.*

Figure 4.12 *Transparent greenhouses for shelter.*

To offer a degree of shelter within this otherwise radically exposed environment, several greenhouses were introduced. Their transparent materiality preserves the visual permeability of the space while providing protected spaces. This gesture blurs the relationship between interior and exterior. The boundary between these realms is further softened through the integration of trees and the use of typically exterior elements, such as pebbles for flooring, within interior zones (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019, pp. 46-47). Nature is allowed to enter and gradually reclaim the space, reinforcing the project's ambiguity and openness.

Figure 4.13 *Conceptual sketch.*

When read through the lens of Habraken's Open Building concept, PC Caritas reveals itself as a constructed support that invites unforeseen infills. The architects refrain from prescribing fixed functions or final forms, instead establishing a flexible, indeterminate framework. Within this system, the building has become an evolving platform for experimentation, ambiguity and user agency (Architecten JDVIV, n.d.).

Key Takeaways for Inclusive Environments:

- Emphasising the structure's ephemeral qualities by avoiding finishes
- Introducing differentiated spatial units within a singular architectural shell
- Providing the support that anticipates future infills
- Establishing visual permeability across horizontal and vertical planes
- Decentralising entrance hierarchies to ensure multiple access points
- Blurring the relationship between exterior and interior
- Encouraging the integration and takeover of nature

4.2 [Working On] Common Ground

Location: Pristina, Kosovo
Actors: raumlaborberlin, Manifesta 14 Pristina & participants
Transformation: 2022

The project is located in the former brick factory built in 1947. Today, it is recognised as Pristina's most significant and largest post-industrial site. After the factory operations were put on hold, the site was officially transferred to the Municipality of Pristina in 2021. Shortly thereafter, during the 14th edition *Manifesta 14 Pristina* of the European Nomadic Biennial, the factory was opened to the public and repurposed as an Eco Urban Learning Centre. Within this framework, and in collaboration with the German architectural collective raumlaborberlin, a program of workshops was launched, centred around urgent contemporary themes such as sustainability, climate change and ecological urbanism (Manifesta, n.d.). True to its title, Working on Common Ground seeks to reclaim the site as a shared platform for inclusive participation, collective knowledge production and hands-on learning. The initiative reimagines the former factory as a laboratory. The project team and participants approached the former factory in its ruinous state as a park-like territory to be observed, tested and transformed (Nichols, 2022).

Figure 4.14 *Repurposing the brick factory as an Eco Urban Learning Centre.*

The process began with a close study of the as-found condition. Participants mapped out the existing spaces, circulation paths, interesting found materials and spatial interrelations. Based on the findings, new interventions were considered and tested through acts of dismantling, reconfiguring spaces or reassembling materials. For instance, bricks from a collapsed wall were repurposed into a kitchen bar, simply stacked on top of each other and rotated in different directions to form new patterns (Nichols, 2022).

Figure 4.15 *Ruin of the brick factory.*

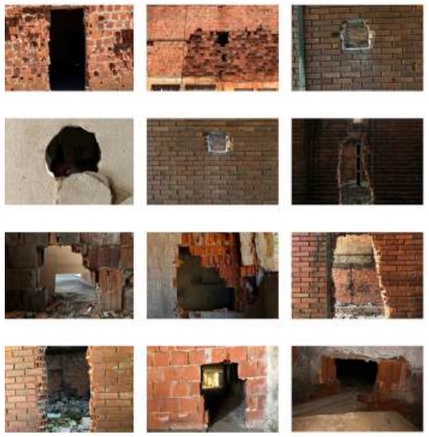


Figure 4.16 *Mapping of openings in various brick walls.*

Figure 4.17 *Bar construction of reclaimed bricks found on site.*

Figure 4.18 *Finished kitchen bar.*

Figure 4.19 *Brick smashing.*

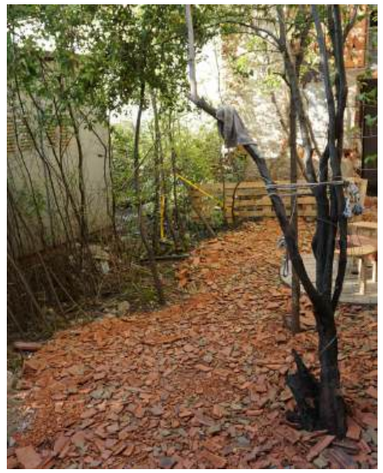


Figure 4.20 *Overgrown electric central area transformed into a garden.*

Figure 4.21 *Wood workshop.*

Broken or fragmented bricks were further crushed to create garden paving. In the wood workshop, offcuts and waste timber were creatively recomposed into new chairs. These actions reflect a resource-conscious and improvisational building methodology, privileging continuous making over an one-off act of construction. The aim is not to produce a finalised architectural product, but to activate the site's ongoing transformative potential by using what is already present to create what is currently needed. This slow and cyclical process of building and unbuilding demands continuous dialogue among participants and horizontal, non-hierarchical collaboration. Rather than fixed authorship, the process embodies shared agency, whereby all stakeholders participate in shaping the site based on local knowledge and immediate needs (Nichols, 2022).

Beyond the workshops, the initiative offers a diverse program of everyday activities, including gardening, swimming, cooking, communal meals and ongoing research. These are complemented by cultural events, such as music performances, film screenings and visual arts exhibitions, featuring regional artists (Nichols, 2022). The project ultimately demonstrates that heritage can be sustained and reimagined through creative, low-tech and small-scale interventions.

Key Takeaways for an Inclusive Environment:

- Reframing the site as a material resource for its occupants to promote a circular, inclusive material economy
- Experimentation and continuous adaptation to meet evolving spatial and social needs
- Constructing simple, low-impact furniture and accessories from reclaimed materials
- Horizontal collaboration and co-creation between architects and participants

Figure 4.22 *Round table conference.*

Figure 4.23 *Cooking and eating together.*

Figure 4.24 *Swimming pool.*

5 Master's Project - Reimagining the Castle of Heers Through Ruination

5.1 Site Analysis

5.1.1 Geographical Context

The Castle of Heers sits within a flat green landscape typical of Flanders, situated between the villages of Heers and Veulen. This location and rural setting not only gives the site a distinct socio-cultural relevance but also a considerable ecological value, further amplifying the domain's heritage. The surrounding environment, rich in biodiversity, forms a valuable natural habitat. Additionally, the castle's parkland is integrated into a network of hiking trails and bordered by bicycle paths that traverse the Flemish countryside, linking the site to the wider region (Erfgoed & Visie bvba, 2015, pp. 7-38). Rather than being perceived as limitations, these rural characteristics should be embraced as opportunities. They offer a solid basis for reimagining the site's future potential, particularly regarding accessibility, sustainability and cultural resonance within a broader urban and regional framework.

In terms of residential patterns, Heers reflects a distinctly non-urban typology. In contrast to densely populated urban environments characterised by apartment blocks and terraced housing, the local population predominantly lives in detached, single-family homes, often accompanied by generous gardens. While this lifestyle may seem idyllic for some, it can also lead to feelings of isolation, thereby highlighting an increasing need for more socially connected and inclusive living environments.

Heers remains a quiet, somewhat remote locality, marked by an essential yet limited range of facilities, including a primary school, sports infrastructures, wellness services, a library and a church. Social amenities such as cafés and restaurants are scarce, reflecting the slow-paced rhythm of rural life. These modest conditions, however, underline the need for considered development that respects the village's character while simultaneously enriching its communal and cultural fabric.

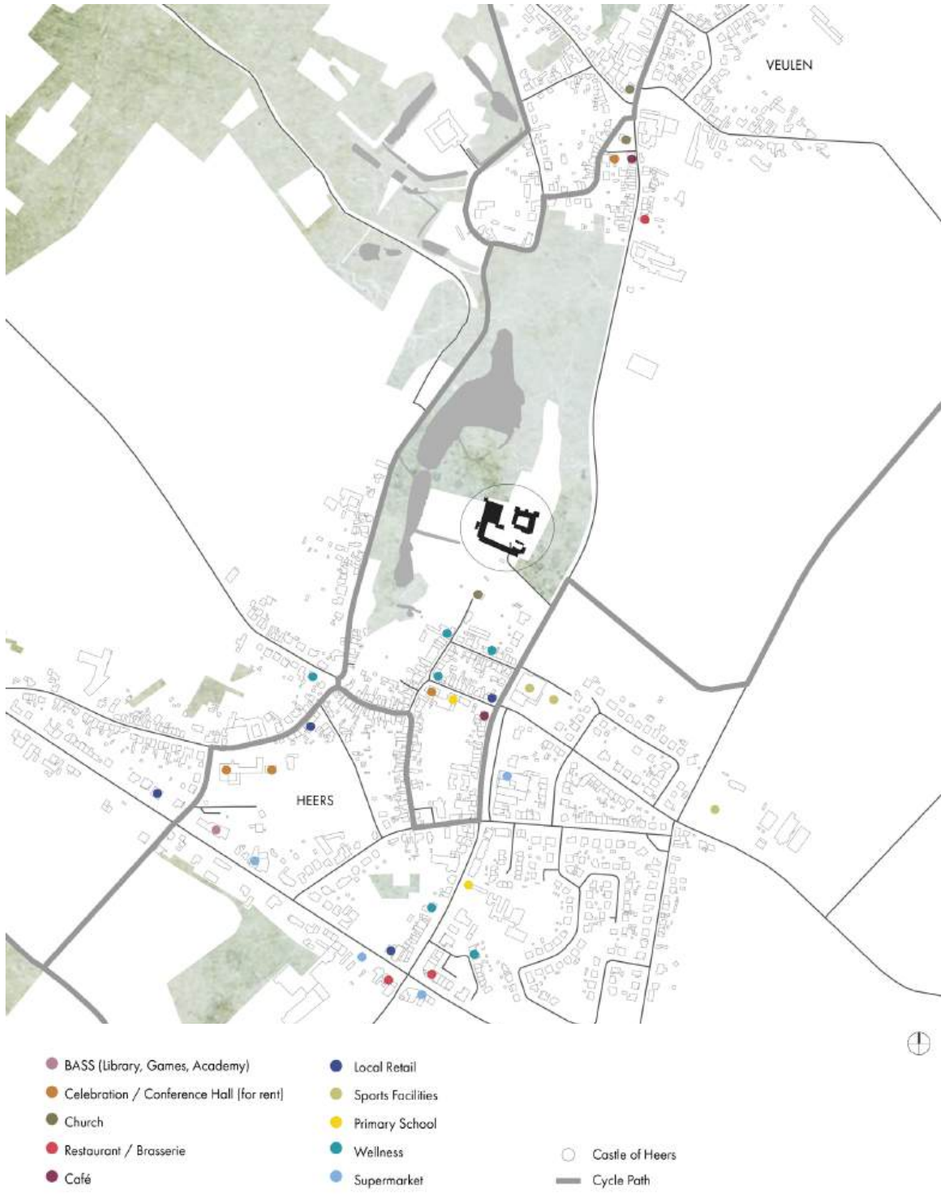


Figure 5.1 *Site analysis with surrounding facilities, 2025, by author.*

5.1.2 Demographic Analysis

When imagining the future of the Castle of Heers, it's essential to first understand the demographic composition of the surrounding area and consider how the site can meaningfully respond to local needs. As illustrated in Figure 5.2, the population is predominantly local with little cultural diversity. On the one hand, such rootedness may encourage a strong collective identity. On the other hand, however, it can also pose challenges for inclusivity, particularly for individuals who do not reflect the dominant cultural profile.

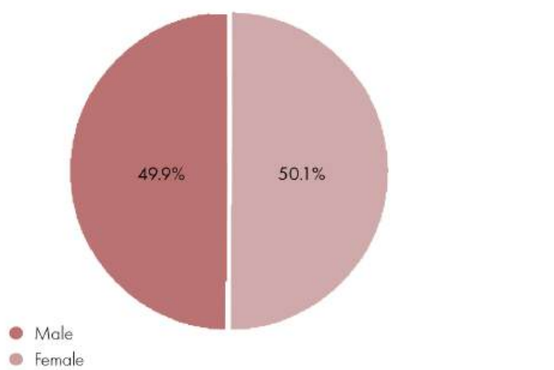


Figure 5.2 *Demographic analysis of the municipality of Heers - gender and origin, 2025,* by author.

In addition, the ageing demographic, shown in Figure 5.3, necessitates a design approach that prioritises accessibility, comfort and intergenerational usability. At the same time, the project must also generate opportunities for younger residents and visitors to engage with the site in ways that feel relevant and inviting to them. Notably, the relatively balanced gender distribution across the population highlights the importance of designing equitably, ensuring that no specific group dominates either the use or perception of the space. Taken together, these insights point towards a spatial, social and cultural agenda rooted in inclusivity.

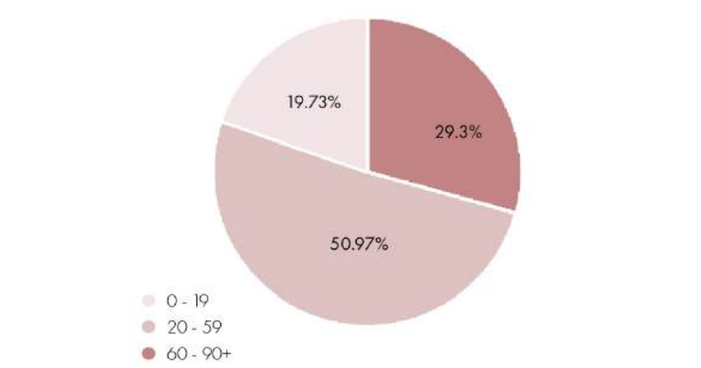


Figure 5.3 *Demographic analysis of the municipality of Heers - age groups and age distribution,* 2025, by author.

5.2 Vision - Redefining the Castle's Role in its Local Context

My vision for the Castle of Heers resists the transformation of the site into a high-end cultural destination or commercialised heritage attraction. Instead, the aim is to reimagine the castle as a living, evolving space that is connected to the needs, rhythms and aspirations of its local community. The vision builds upon existing local dynamics, such as ongoing civic engagement and the valuable momentum generated by the volunteer group Heerlijk(heid) Heers, and seeks to further shape the domain into an inclusive, publicly accessible space in alignment with the ambitions of the municipality of Heers.

Repurposing the castle into yet another museum or elite cultural venue would, in this context, be redundant. Castles around the world have already been preserved, restored and exhibited. The typology is well established and widely recognised. Furthermore, the relative remoteness of Heers poses logistical and infrastructural limitations that make such commercially driven programs unsustainable: while occasional visitors may be drawn by the site's natural beauty or a brief excursion, the area lacks the necessary facilities to support large-scale tourism. More importantly, an 'aggressive', profit-oriented development approach could increase property values and risk displacing residents. Such outcomes would be fundamentally misaligned with the inclusive core of the thesis.

Instead, the future of the Castle of Heers lies in local engagement. The active role already played by the community constitutes the foundation upon which the site's future should be constructed. Rather than marginalising these stakeholders, the project should empower them. In this regard, a series of core questions emerges:

- What do current users (volunteers) need to sustain and expand their engagement?
- What facilities can be introduced to support their ongoing contributions?
- Which elements of the project require permanence and where can flexibility encourage experimentation and community-led usage?
- How can ruination serve as a tool for this process?

Furthermore, anchoring the project in the rural and social fabric also reveals the castle's strategic potential as a connector. Despite its secluded location, the site occupies a pivotal position between the villages of Heers and Veulen. It is intersected by a network of cycling and walking paths that naturally draw people together. In this way, the castle can function as a central meeting place, bridging the distance between two local communities. Moreover, the castle also holds the potential to become a space for newcomers and visitors. Demographic insights suggest that such informal, cross-cultural encounters could help the social fabric and strengthen the community's resilience over time. Ultimately, the goal is to cultivate a shared space that transcends hierarchical structures and that is open, welcoming and relevant to people of all ages, backgrounds and means.

5.3 Project Scope

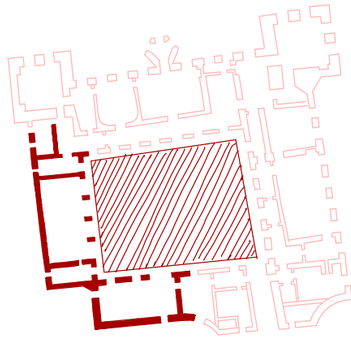


Figure 5.4 *Project focus - servants' quarter and courtyard.*

Figure 5.5 *Noble wings as hands-on restoration studios.*

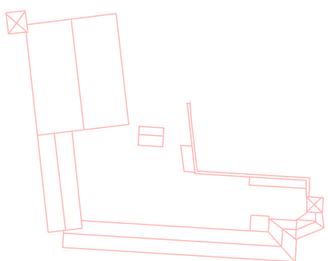


Figure 5.6 *Tithe barn and farm buildings as storage spaces for local farmers.*

Given the extensive scale of the Castle of Heers and the limited timeframe of the master's project, the design intentionally focuses on a specific and underexplored part of the site. The intervention centres on a concentrated and meaningful transformation within the west and south wings of the castle, historically known as the servants' quarters, and the courtyard. These two wings, long marginalised in both function and attention, are characterised by their enclosed and ruinous state, in stark contrast to the more noble spaces. Rather than restoring them to a romanticised or idealised past condition, the design embraces their state of ruination as an opportunity to challenge dominant historical narratives and invite new interpretations of the space. The project aims to bring these once-invisible areas into public consciousness.

Regarding the rest of the castle, particularly the more noble and decorative rooms, a restorative approach is proposed. However, some selected rooms may intentionally be left unfinished to serve as hands-on restoration studios, for example, for students of art and heritage conservation. This not only offers educational value but also activates underused spaces, opening the site to a new audience without compromising its historical character.

In parallel, the tithe barn and adjacent farm buildings are envisioned as practical resources for local farmers, offering space for housing animals and storing agricultural materials such as hay and machinery. Meanwhile, the surrounding meadows could be repurposed into community gardens, reinforcing the site's rural context and enhancing local food production.

Through this layered and site-sensitive approach, the project aims to balance the needs of contemporary use with the principles of heritage conservation. By selectively intervening where social and spatial value can be amplified, and preserving where appropriate, the project protects the castle's historical integrity while making it relevant for present and future generations.

K. 0.26
FORMER SERVANTS' QUARTER

- Wooden planks, beams
- Broken windows
- Handtools
- Tubes
- Scaffolding




K. 0.27
FORMER SERVANTS' QUARTER

- More handtools

K. 0.28
FORMER SERVANTS' QUARTER

- Individual scaffolding
- Openings to former South-West Tower
- Broken windows
- Patina



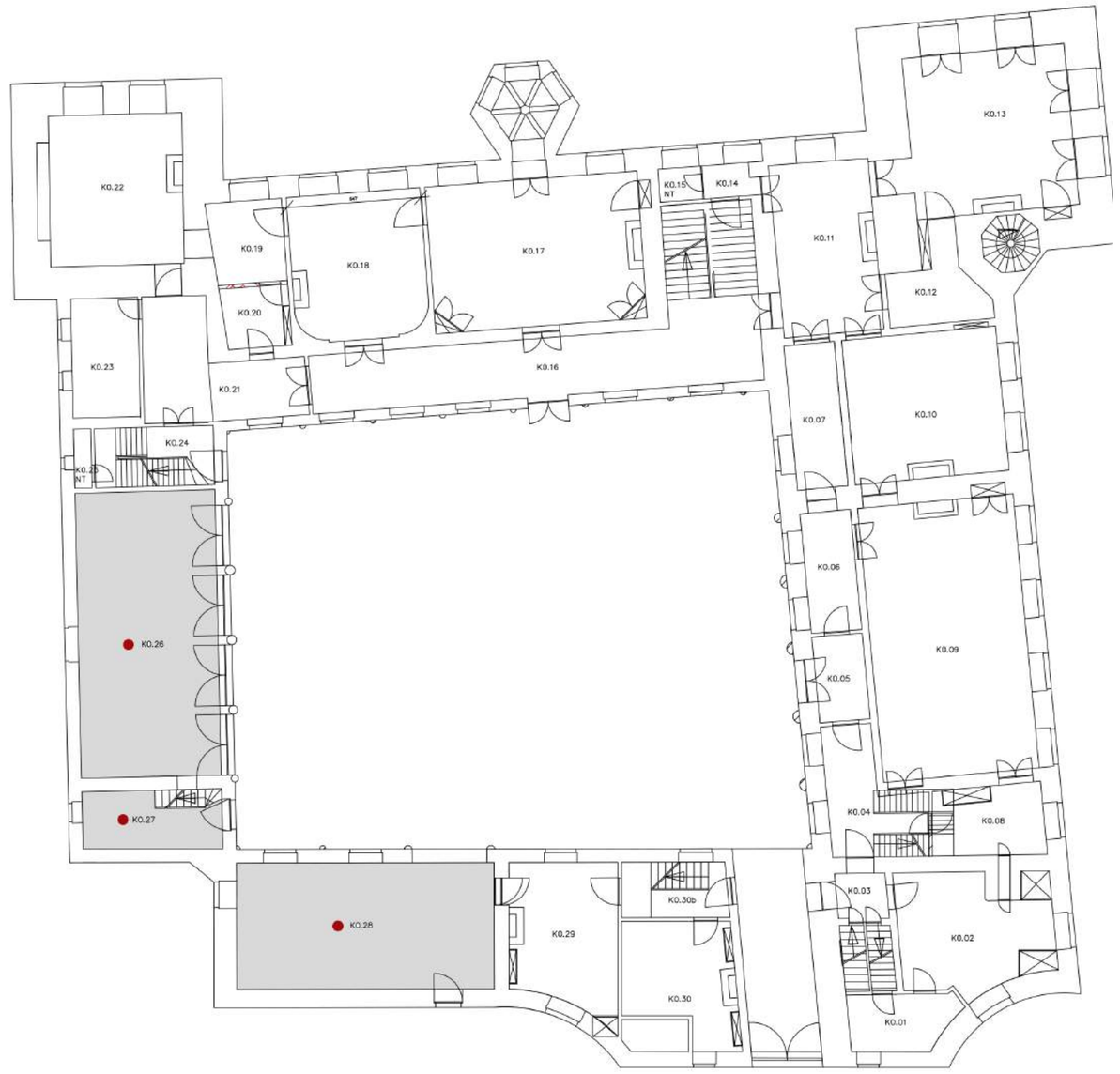



Figure 5.7 *Room catalogue - Castle's ground floor.*

5.4 Stuff Mapping & Reuse Possibilities

To define a relevant and grounded program for the Castle of Heers, a process of material-led exploration was initiated. Drawing from Stewart Brand's concept of "stuff" in his "Shearing Layers" theory (CESBE1x Circular Economy Built Environment, 2021), the ruin was examined as a material library waiting to be activated to inform the design and intervention.

1. The first step involved a visual analysis of the site, using photographic documentation to examine spaces beyond the west and south wings. Through this process, leftover materials, architectural fragments and discarded elements were identified and catalogued. Although no longer structurally or conservatively significant, these items hold great potential for informal reuse.

   (Images in the catalogue were taken by myself and international architecture students in previous years.)

K. 1.01

- Wooden planks, beams

K. 1.02

- Fragments (stones, tiles)
- Chairs

K. 1.19

- Fragments
- Blue barrels
- Wooden planks

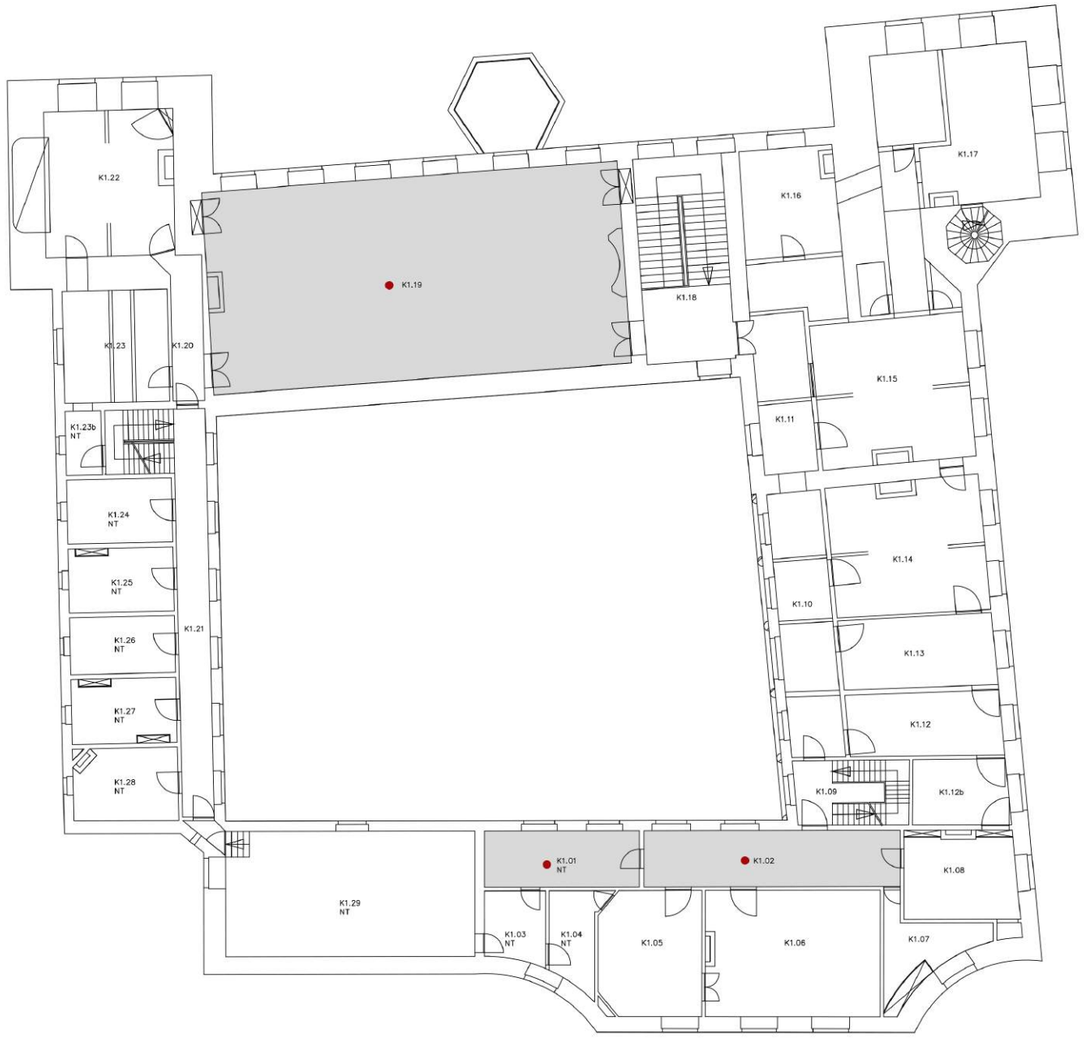


Figure 5.8 *Room catalogue - Castle's first floor.*

K. 2.02

- Small wooden elements

K. 2.11
FORMER GYM

- Gym Equipment

K. 2.16

- Wooden planks

ROOF OF K. 1.29, K.1.28

Parts of emergency roof when being replaced

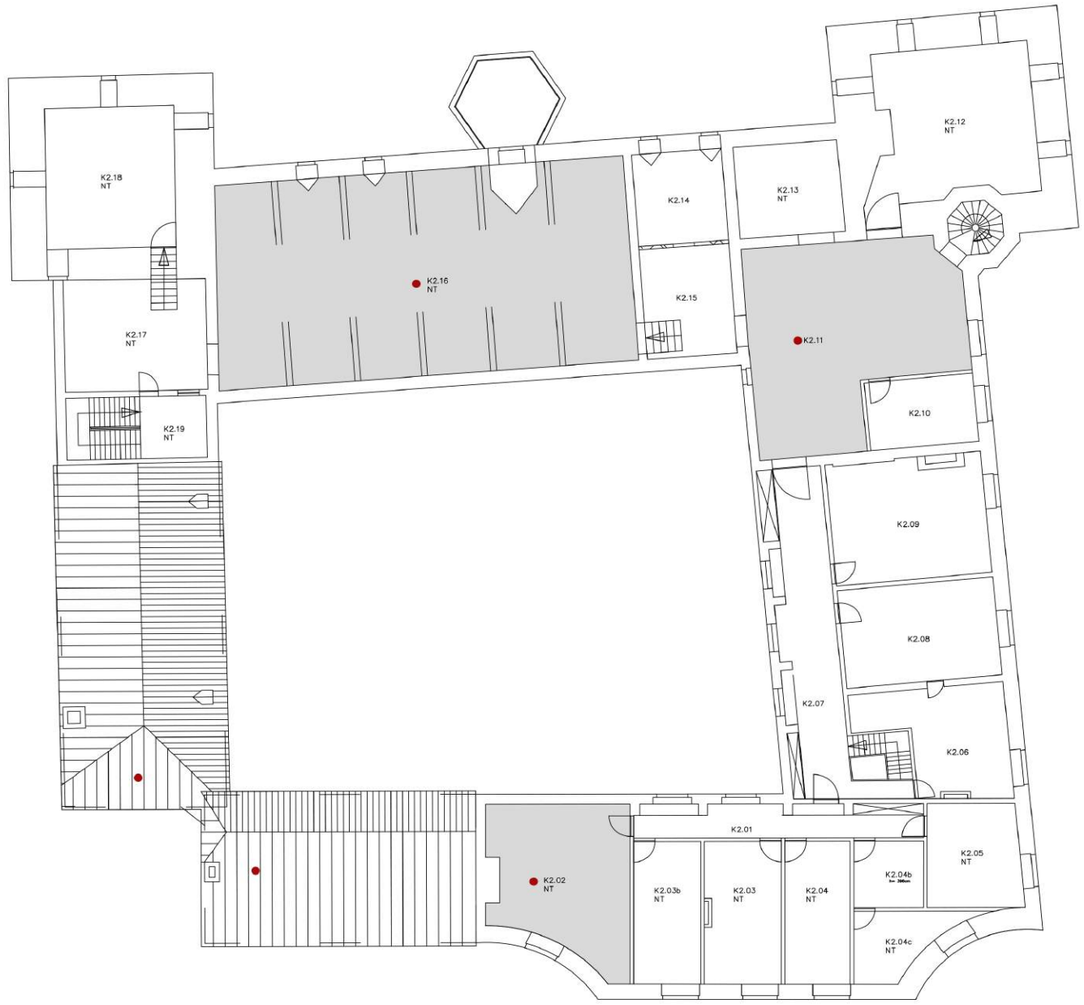
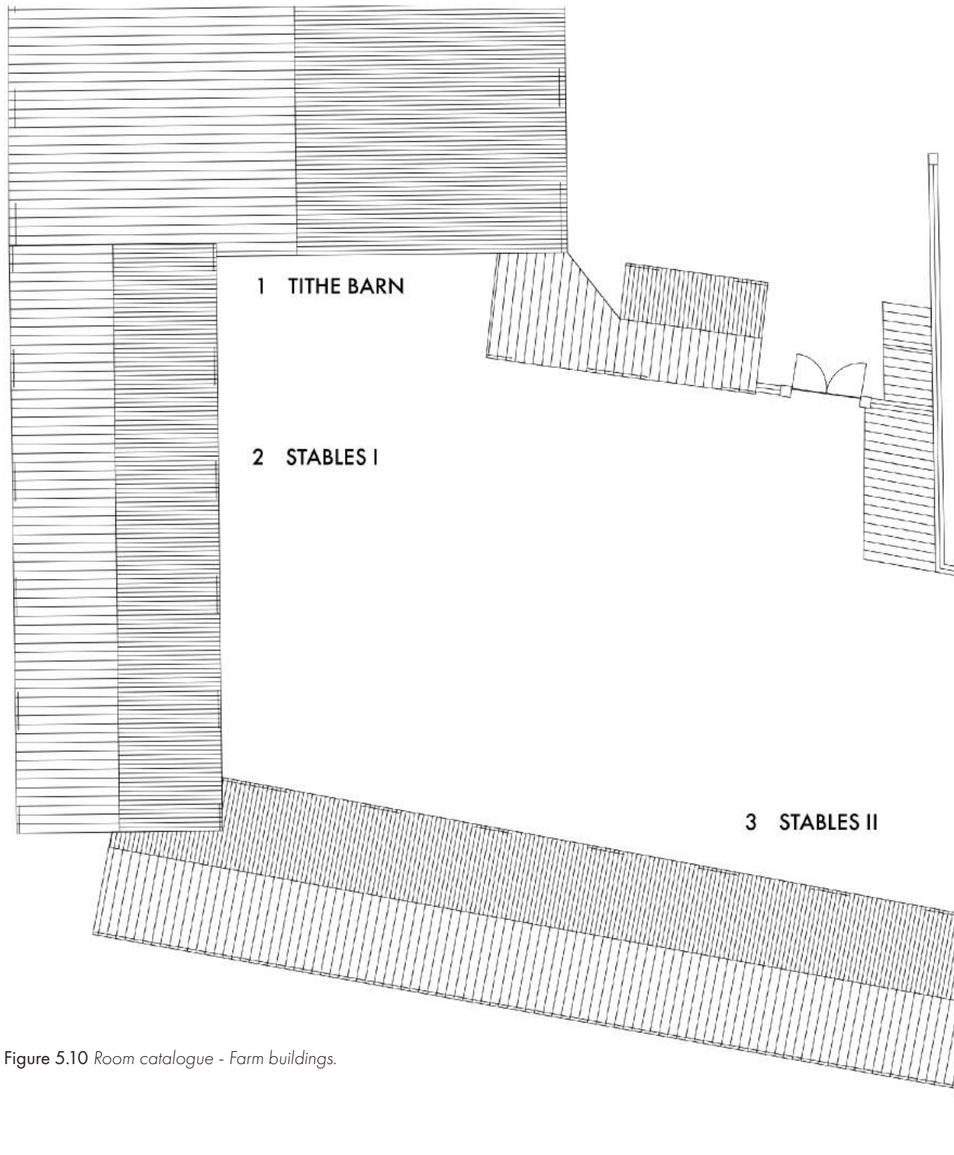


Figure 5.9 *Room catalogue - Castle's second floor.*



1 TITHE BARN

- Loose bricks
- Parts of emergency roof when being replaced

2 STABLES I

- Loose bricks
- Roof tiles

3 STABLES II

- Bricks & Stones

4 SHEDS

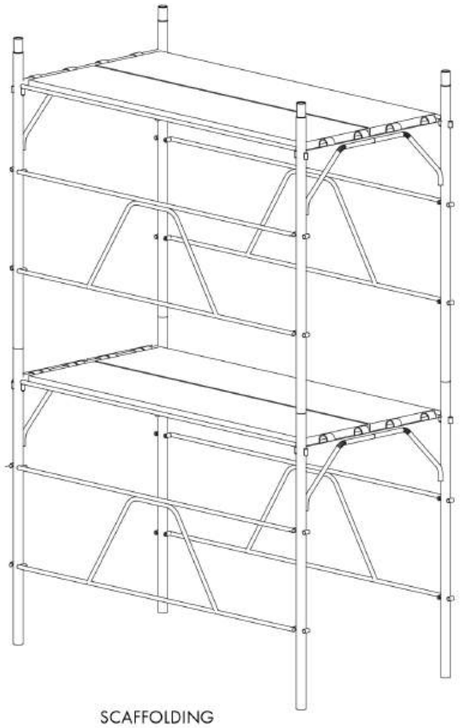
- Tree trunks

Figure 5.10 *Room catalogue - Farm buildings.*

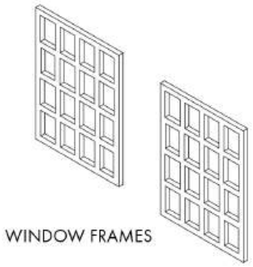
BARRELS

CHAIRS

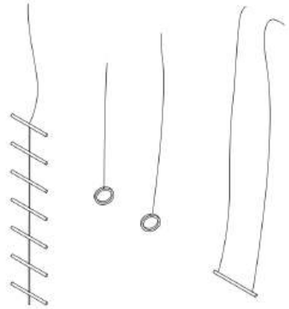
EMERGENCY ROOF ELEMENTS



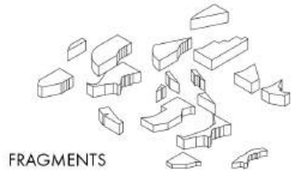
SCAFFOLDING



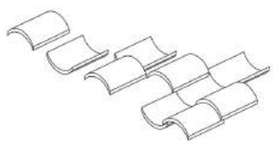
WINDOW FRAMES



GYM EQUIPMENT

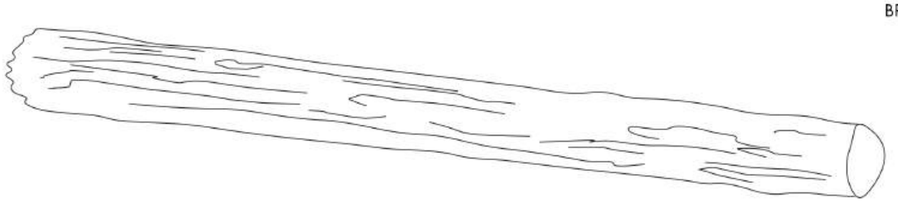


FRAGMENTS

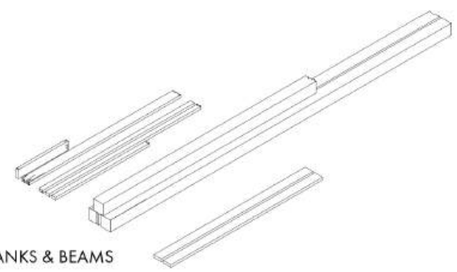


ROOF TILES

BRICKS



TREE TRUNK



WOODEN PLANKS & BEAMS

Figure 5.11 *Found objects and materials.*

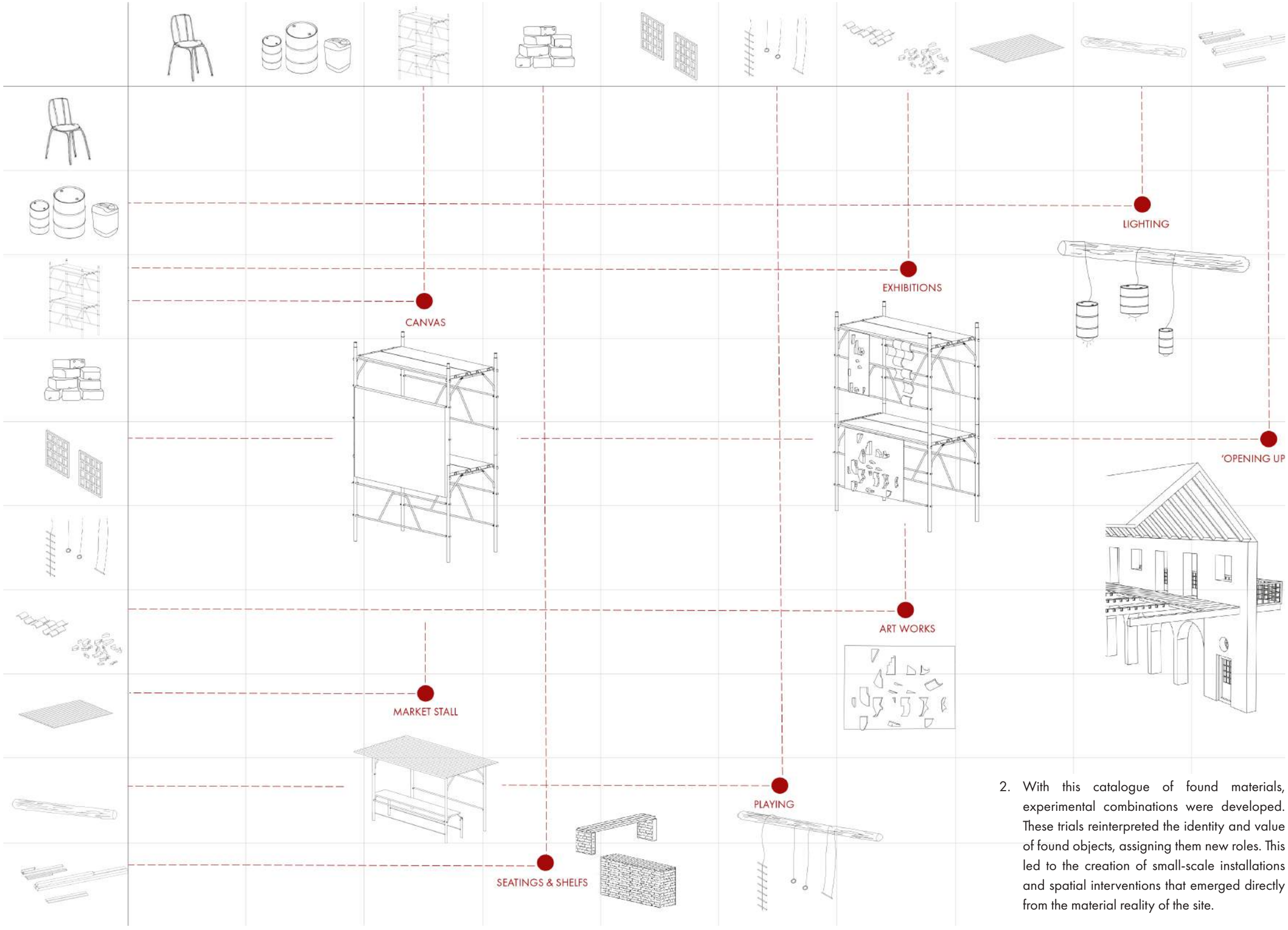


Figure 5.12 *Combinations of found objects and materials.*

2. With this catalogue of found materials, experimental combinations were developed. These trials reinterpreted the identity and value of found objects, assigning them new roles. This led to the creation of small-scale installations and spatial interventions that emerged directly from the material reality of the site.

3. The design process then evolved into programmatic thinking and the reinterpretation of material potential into a series of social and spatial activities. The proposed uses reflect both the capabilities of the materials found and the real needs of current and future users, respecting the current organic life of the site.

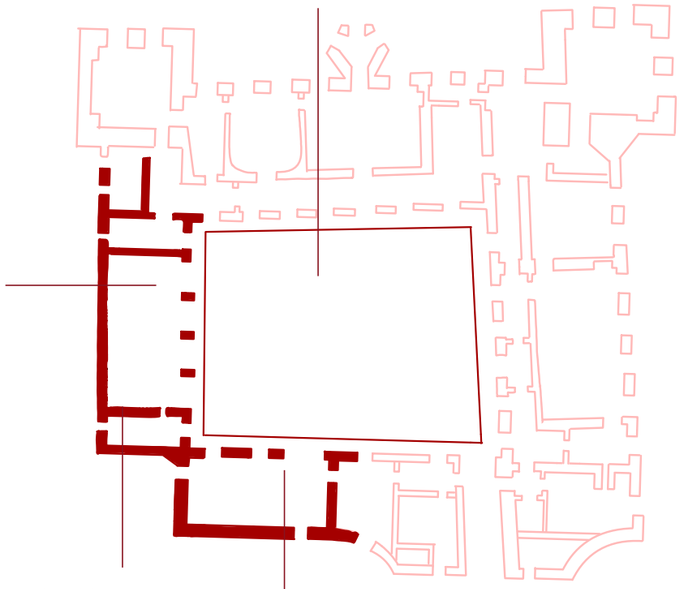
- Programs emerging from found materials
- Programs independent of found materials but grounded in local needs
- Additional programs

COURTYARD:

- Weekly / monthly local market
- Small concerts and other performances
- Communal gathering space

WEST WING:

- Shared kitchen and communal gathering space: Inspired by the existing volunteer practice of cooking together in a temporary container in the park, this space could evolve into a permanent, flexible hub for everyday life and informal hospitality.
- Santary facilities



WEST WING BASEMENT:

- Bike repair station
- Workshop spaces

SOUTH WING:

- Ateliers
- Art installations and exhibitions

Figure 5.13 *Imagining possible programs and activities*

5.5 Design Strategies for Inclusivity

In reimagining the Castle of Heers and as inspired by John Habraken's Open Building concept, I do not position myself as the only author of the site's future, but more as a facilitator providing a spatial and infrastructural support, while mainly leaving the infill to the users and their evolving needs. This participatory attitude honours the ongoing efforts of the community and encourages long-term adaptability and ownership.

Based on prior research in this thesis and in-depth case study analyses, four core design strategies have been identified to guide the transformation of the servants' quarters into a more inclusive living environment: accessibility, permeability, low-technology and flexibility.

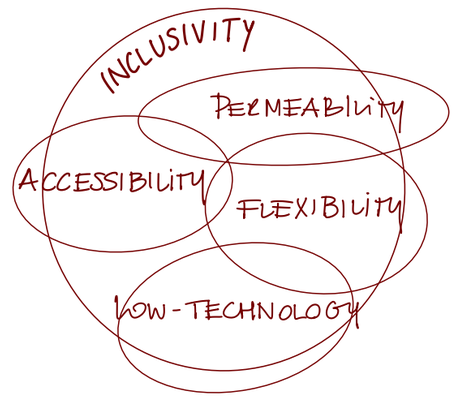


Figure 5.14 *Diagram illustrating the interrelation between the four strategies to achieve inclusivity.*

1. ACCESSIBILITY:

A first step is to reframe how people approach and move through the domain. Currently, access to the domain is limited to a formal gate at the Nieuwe Steenweg and a single formal entrance on the castle's south facade. A new pedestrian and cycling bridge from Vijverstraat may introduce a secondary, more informal point of entry, integrating the site more closely with the regional cycling infrastructure. Additional bike paths through the park can further embed the site into the everyday mobility network. This proposal repositions the historically overlooked west side as a new gateway, transforming perceptions of the castle and foregrounding the former servants' quarters. A key architectural gesture is the reinterpretation of the former south-west tower, which becomes the main entrance to the proposed new program. This intervention is both symbolic and functional by signalling openness and welcome, and connecting the west and south wings in a unified gesture. Internally, vertical circulation must be reconfigured to ensure inclusivity across all building levels.

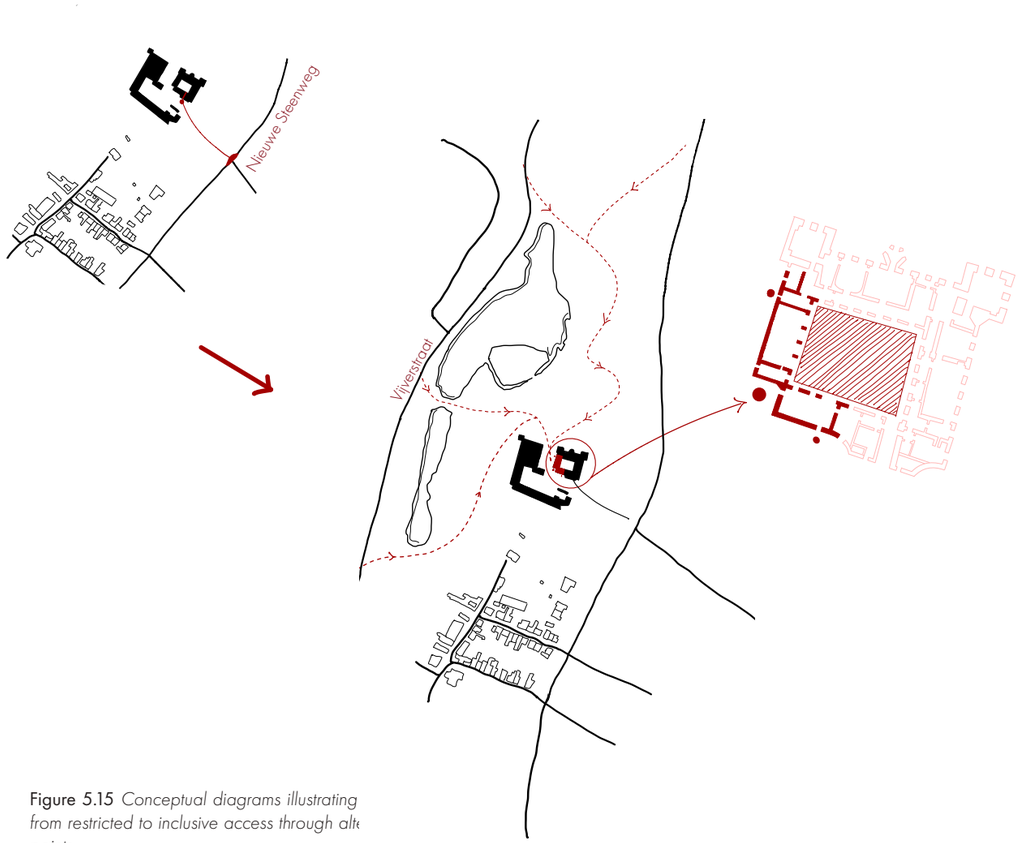


Figure 5.15 *Conceptual diagrams illustrating from restricted to inclusive access through alt points.*

2. PERMEABILITY:

Where the ruin suggests openness, the design responds by embracing it to increase visual permeability and to blur the boundary between interior and exterior. Glazing may be removed from selected windows, new openings introduced, and, for instance, a possible future roof replacement could incorporate partially transparent sections to allow daylight into the enclosed quarters. Permeability is not only visual but also spatial. The newly introduced entrance at the former south-west tower, combined with facade openings, is designed to facilitate flow through the building and into the courtyard. Furthermore, selective removal of floors and walls enhances light, ventilation, and horizontal and vertical connection, opening up views and circulation across the wings.

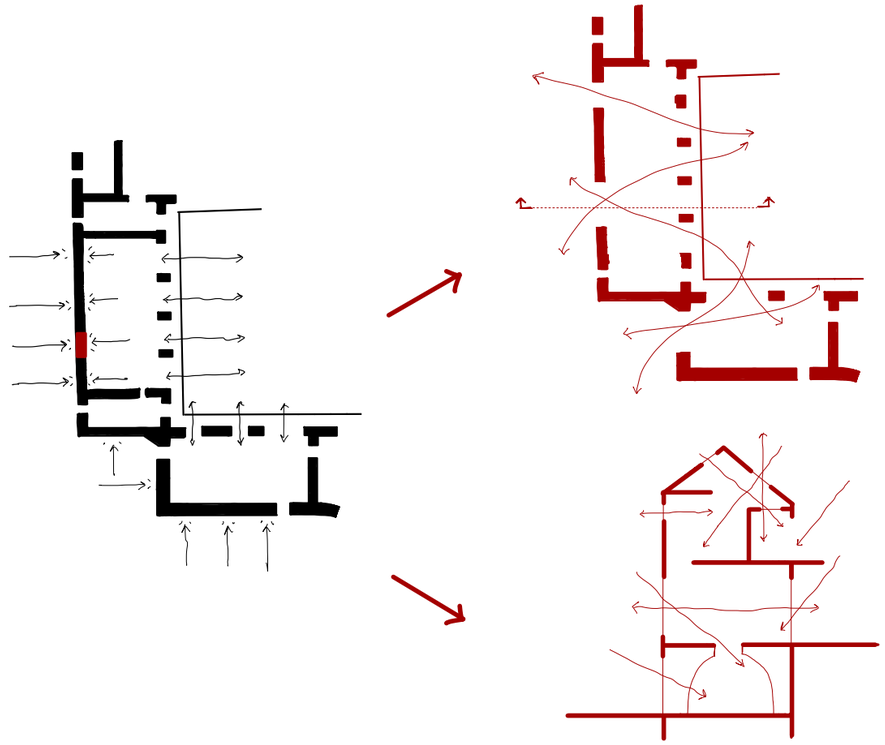


Figure 5.16 *Conceptual diagrams illustrating the transition from enclosure to spatial permeability by physically opening up the building.*

3. LOW-TECHNOLOGY

While the original construction relied on rich materials and elaborate decoration, often not so locally sourced, the project intentionally favours circular, low-tech approaches. The castle is reimagined as a living material library, empowering users to build and organise their environment independently. Even for structural interventions and changes in the built fabric, a low-technology approach is applied to foster sustainability. Processes of deconstruction and reconstruction take place. For example, when a wall is further opened, the bricks can be reused to build furniture or partition walls elsewhere. Furthermore, ventilation strategies remain predominantly natural, with thoughtful layering of spaces - from exterior to semi-enclosed to insulated interior - ensuring a passive, environmental comfort without significant investment in high-tech solutions.

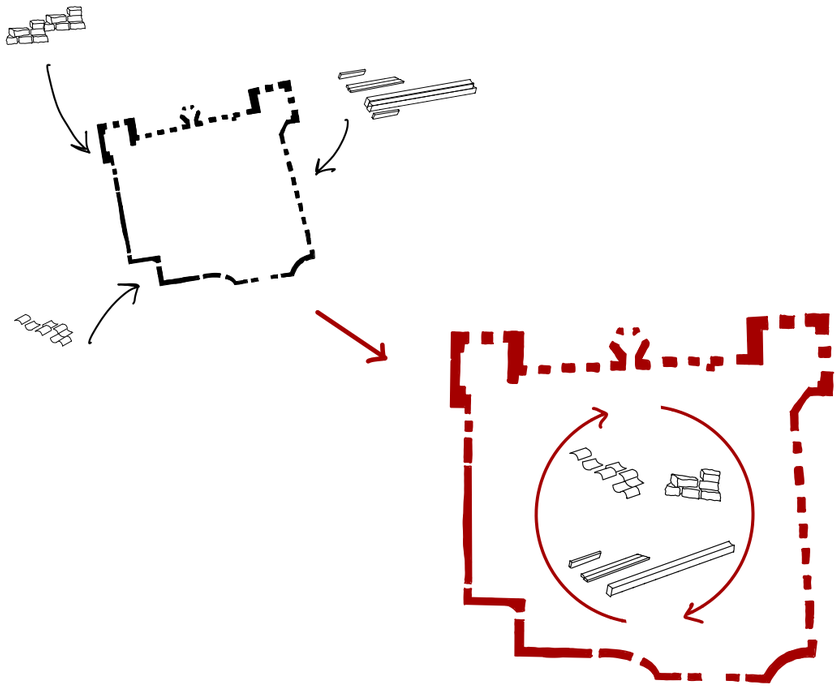


Figure 5.17 *Conceptual diagrams illustrating the transition from linear resource use to circular material reuse.*

4. FLEXIBILITY

Within the established architectural support, users retain agency and flexibility. While essential infrastructure elements, such as a shared cooking area, are fixed to sustain the volunteer initiative, the remaining space is open to interpretation. Users are encouraged to shape the stuff layer by adding, moving or removing elements as needed. The use of low-tech construction and on-site materials supports this dynamic approach, enabling structures to be easily assembled, disassembled, and reconfigured over time.

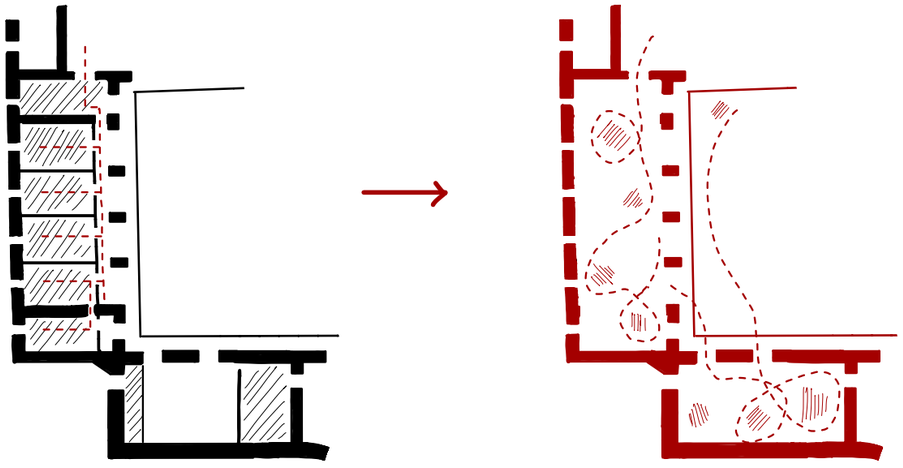


Figure 5.18 *Conceptual diagrams illustrating the transition from fixed layouts to a flexible interior.*

6 Conclusion

The societal relevance of castles has undergone a profound transformation over the centuries. Once conceived as symbols of power, prestige and defence - with fortified walls and hierarchically organised spatial layouts reinforcing social segregation and exclusivity - many castles today endure as architectural relics, detached from their socio-spatial context and often largely inaccessible to the public. Situated in a rural area in Flanders, the Castle of Heers exemplifies this tension between past grandeur and present obsolescence. While some such sites have been abandoned and left to decay due to their perceived irrelevance in contemporary life, others are 'rescued' through restoration or top-down repurposing. Yet, these efforts frequently risk reproducing the exclusivity these structures once embodied, reinscribing social and spatial divisions rather than overcoming them. As an alternative, this thesis proposed a third approach: reimaging ruination not as a symbol of decline, but as an architectural and social strategy within heritage practice. Rather than framing decay as a deficit, ruination, here, is treated as a conceptual and material opening that enables new, inclusive forms of engagement, and, thereby, counters the exclusivity of castles.

A historical and architectural analysis of the Castle of Heers revealed how its spatial organisation encoded a rigid social hierarchy, emphasising the interrelation between architecture and social structures. The thesis affirmed that architecture is rarely neutral and, instead, often functions as a mechanism of exclusion, shaping physical, social and symbolic boundaries. Drawing on this insight, the research critically engaged with contemporary literature to investigate the implications of ruination for the built structure and its form of regulation. The analysis suggested that ruination can emerge as a counterforce, diminishing architecture's prescriptive power and, in doing so, creating space for alternative narratives and uses towards inclusivity. In this context, the thesis proposed new gateways by looking into informal, community-centred heritage practices that reject static conceptions of buildings as objects awaiting reprogramming through top-down directives. Instead, it argued for participatory, open-ended approaches to flexible reuse. Theoretical models such as Habraken's Open Building concept and Brand's Shearing Layers provided a foundational lens for both the thesis and master's project. These frameworks treat buildings as layered, dynamic systems embedded in broader social and material ecologies. They also reinforced my position within the process-oriented, community-sensitive reimagination of the Castle of Heers. In addition, the case study analysis yielded critical insights and underpinned the development of four design strategies for inclusivity.

The thesis underlined the persistent tensions within heritage management, particularly in relation to adaptive reuse in contexts marked by ruination. Legal and institutional frameworks often resist the experimental, step-by-step approaches and favour more formalised, conservation-driven responses. Yet the condition of the Castle of Heers precisely calls for an approach that moves beyond traditional preservation or full-scale restoration, embracing ruination as a generative condition.

Such an approach resists the risk of reinstating historical hierarchies and the aestheticization of the past to suit commercial agendas and instead prioritises local agency. In Heers, this dynamic is already taking shape. The volunteer group Heerlijk(heid) Heers, in collaboration with the heritage organisation Herita, has played a key role in sustaining the site through care and commitment rather than capital investment. Their ongoing work has begun to reshape the site's narrative, repositioning heritage as a living, negotiated process that is not anchored in expert imposition but in bottom-up participation. The thesis embraced and built on this momentum, identifying it as a crucial component of any viable future for the site.

The master's project responded by proposing a non-prescriptive reactivation of the castle, providing a framework that can be filled and evolve alongside users' needs and capacities. Instead of imposing a fixed masterplan with strictly implemented functions, the project developed four core design strategies - accessibility, permeability, low-technology and flexibility - that enable forms of inclusivity, shared authorship and adaptive engagement with the ruin. Rather than positioning restoration and adaptation as oppositional forces, it frames them as complementary within a more inclusive design methodology.

The thesis asked whether and how ruination could be reimagined as an architectural and social strategy to transform exclusive heritage sites into inclusive places for community. Rather than viewing ruination as a sign of failure or loss, the thesis and the project approached it as a valid, generative phase in a building's lifecycle that opens up new spatial and social possibilities. At the architectural level, ruination was positioned as a tool that softens architecture's regulatory power, and as such, opens space for reappropriation and reinterpretation, making it possible to disrupt architectural hierarchies and support more inclusive futures. In the case of the Castle of Heers, this meant embracing its current state of decay as a starting point for design interventions that invite reinterpretation and ongoing transformation. Rather than restoring the site to a singular historical moment, ruination allows it to evolve organically with its users and enables it to remain alive, responsive and open-ended. Socially, this strategy repositions the castle as a site of potential for new forms of collective ownership and activity. Ruination makes spaces for informal uses and community initiatives. In rural areas like Heers and Veulen, this approach can strengthen connections between residents and visitors, while offering a counter-model to the control and exclusivity frequently embedded in conventional heritage programming. Overall, ruination enables a dual transformation: it reconfigures the architectural meaning of the site while also reshaping the social fabric around it.

While rooted in a specific case, the developed thesis contributed a conceptual and practical model applicable to other contested sites - particularly those burdened by exclusionary pasts - that have lost their relevance in contemporary times. Ultimately, the thesis hopes to contribute to a growing discourse among adaptive reuse practitioners, heritage professionals, policymakers, developers and architects, advocating for open-ended, community-oriented approaches. It positions heritage not as a static relic of the past but as an active and collective project, where people can reimagine their relationship to place, history and one another.

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