

Contrasting Dialogues

Lluís Ma Vidal i Arderiu and the Intervention at Santa Maria de Lillet.

Ariadna Perich Capdeferro^a, Roger Such Sanmartín^b

^aETSAB Barcelona School of Architecture, Barcelona, Spain, ariadna.perich@upc.edu; ^bETSAB Barcelona School of Architecture, Barcelona, Spain, roger.such@upc.edu;

Abstract

The intervention at the monastery of Santa Maria de Lillet in Berguedà, Catalonia, exemplifies the innovative and experimental approach of Lluís Ma Vidal i Arderiu, a largely overlooked figure in contemporary Catalan architecture. Conducted between 1989 and 1992, the project involved the consolidation, rehabilitation, and reinterpretation of a 9th-century Romanesque monastery situated in a remote and rugged landscape. By the late 1980s, only the church roof remained intact, while the cloister, monastic quarters, and ancillary agricultural structures were in a state of near ruin. With limited possibilities for full restoration, Vidal i Arderiu devised a radically original strategy, combining minimal consolidation of the historic fabric with the insertion of a lightweight, demountable, and nearly transparent metallic scaffold. This intervention established a new spatial and conceptual dialogue with the original building. The contrast between the massive, stereotomic stone walls of the Romanesque church and the delicate, white, tectonic metallic structure, positioned diagonally across the site, became a defining feature of the project. The scaffold's diagonal orientation intensified the tension between old and new while guiding visitors toward an elevated walkway-roof, offering views of both the ruins and the surrounding Pyrenean landscape. Vidal i Arderiu's intervention exemplifies a careful balance between preservation and innovation, demonstrating how minimal, radical, and performative strategies can enhance historic structures without compromising their integrity. Anticipating contemporary discourses on ephemeral architecture, scenography, and structural ingenuity, the project emphasizes material contrast, precise detailing, and sensitivity to both landscape and heritage. Despite remaining largely unknown outside Catalonia, Vidal i Arderiu's work reveals a pioneering architectural vision, combining experimentation with historical and environmental awareness, and positioning him as a discreet yet influential figure in late 20th-century architectural practice.

Keywords: Lluís Maria Vidal i Arderiu, Santa Maria de Lillet, Tectonics-Stereotomy

Lluís Ma Vidal i Arderiu's personal archive¹ contains photographs, sketches, models, and other graphic documentation of one of the most singular and little-known projects of his career: the intervention at the monastery of Santa Maria de Lillet, located in the Catalan region of Berguedà, on the southern edge of the Pyrenees. Preserved by his family, the archive organizes a set of plans and reports for the two preliminary designs that survive, dated between November 1989 and January 1992, along with a balsa wood model of the final intervention and numerous sketches spread across his notebooks. It also includes

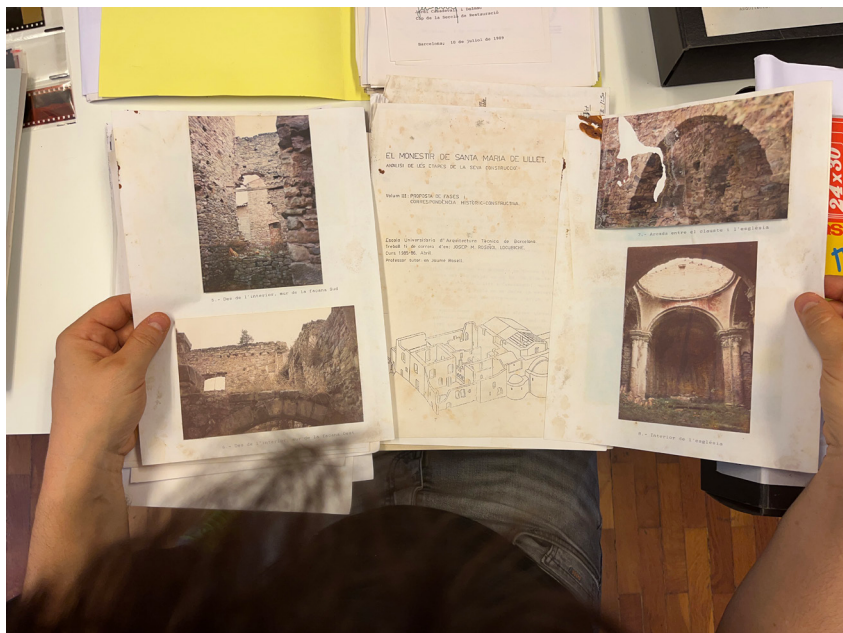


Fig. 1. Santa Maria de Lillet documentation from the archive of Lluís Ma Vidal i Arderiu (Perich-Such, 2025)



Fig. 2. Monastery of Santa Maria de Lillet (Archive of Lluís Ma Vidal i Arderiu, 1994)

slides and photographs of the construction, as well as commercial brochures for scaffolding systems, which anticipate some of the project's defining features.

Vidal i Arderiu's project aimed to consolidate, rehabilitate, and enhance the 9th-century Romanesque monastery. Situated on a promontory adjacent to the road leading to La Pobla de Lillet, the complex was surrounded by a rugged landscape. Originally, the site included a cross-shaped church, a cloister of regular proportions, a series of monastic quarters, and neighboring agricultural structures added over time. By the late 1980s, only the church roof remained standing, while the rest of the buildings were in a state of near ruin.

Faced with the impossibility of a comprehensive restoration, Vidal i Arderiu adopted a unique strategy. Rather than reconstructing the original buildings, he proposed a hybrid approach, halfway between traditional rehabilitation and a performative, ephemeral intervention. The plan combined minimal consolidation of the surviving structures with the introduction of a new metallic scaffold-like structure—light, demountable, and nearly transparent—creating a fresh dialogue with the historic architecture. This new element was almost invisible yet profoundly transformative, establishing a novel spatial and conceptual relationship with the pre-existing monastery.

The contrast between the original stone buildings and the new scaffold is central to the project. The Romanesque church, with its massive, heavy walls, is juxtaposed against the lightweight, white, and transparent metallic structure, composed of uprights and crossbars reminiscent of scaffolding. This material contrast extends to the formal composition, amplified by Vidal i Arderiu's striking decision to place the scaffold diagonally across the site, intersecting the monastery from east to west.

Despite the apparent geometric contrast introduced by the diagonal alignment, the execution was remarkably delicate. The scaffold's uprights and supports were carefully

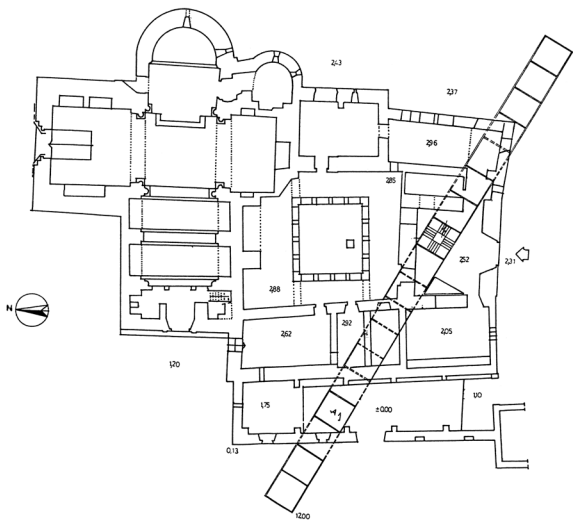


Fig. 3. Plan of the January 1992 project (Archive of Lluís Ma Vidal i Arderiu, 1992)



Fig. 4. Tectonic–stereotomic contrast in the interior of the monastery (Archive of Lluís M. Vidal i Arderiu, 1994)

positioned to avoid any damage to the existing walls. In this way, the layout emphasized the contrast between directions while remaining sensitive to the historic fabric. Notably, the intervention did not interfere with the Romanesque cloister, arguably the most distinctive feature of the 9th-century complex.

On the western side of the monastery, where one of the new entrances was located, Vidal i Arderiu positioned the scaffold's vertical core, incorporating stairs leading to an elevated walkway–roof. This element allowed visitors to ascend to the highest point of the site, offering views of both the ruins and the surrounding landscape. Oriented diagonally toward the Lilet valley and the peaks of Berguedà, the scaffold transformed the monastery into a viewpoint—an architectural lens through which to look and be seen.

The architect's archive contains two versions of the project. The first, dated November 1989, presents a preliminary and still tentative scaffold route, in which the structure traces the perimeter of the monastery walls in a distinctly Cartesian manner. It was not until the

January 1992 version that the diagonal configuration emerged as a decisive and singular gesture, revealing both the radical conceptual ambition of the intervention and the subtle, contrasting dialogue established between old and new.

Sketches in an undated notebook from the archive suggest the origins of this decision. These pages include floor plans, volumetric studies, and perspectives that already indicate the diagonal alignment. Notably, the same notebook also contains sketches for another project, the Sant Agustí Library in Seu d'Urgell (1988), which similarly integrates oblique lines within an orthogonal historic structure. The rehabilitation and transformation of the former church into a library by Vidal i Arderiu was developed concurrently with the Santa Maria de Lillet project, making it reasonable to identify shared motivations and clear design affinities between the two works. The parallel development of these projects may therefore have influenced Vidal i Arderiu's final design decisions.

With the introduction of the light, white, metallic scaffold, and its diagonal orientation, Vidal i Arderiu created a subtle and sensitive intervention that enhanced both the ruins and the landscape. From the outset, he embraced a strategy of contrast, highlighting the value of the historic fabric while adding a contemporary layer of architectural ingenuity. At the time, such interventions were unprecedented in Catalonia, situating Vidal i Arderiu within a realm of ephemeral, performative, and experimental architecture.

This approach was not unique within his oeuvre. Vidal i Arderiu's interest in staging, scenography, and mobile architectural engineering is also evident in other projects, such as the new apse at Sant Miquel de Castelló de Farfanya (1982–1984), where the large altarpiece of the former church appears to float above the floor, and the rehabilitation of the bell



Fig. 5. Sketchbook pages: Santa Maria de Lillet (1989) and Sant Agustí Library, La Seu d'Urgell (1988) (Archive of Lluís Ma Vidal i Arderiu, 1992)

tower of Sant Just at the Cathedral of the Seu d'Urgell (1990), in which he transformed the gabled roof into mobile elements that open and close in synchrony with the ringing of the bells.

Vidal i Arderiu's work remains little-known internationally and locally, largely overlooked in Catalonia. Concentrated in the Pyrenees, away from Barcelona's architectural spotlight of the late 1980s and early 1990s, his interventions on existing heritage—minimal, radical, and conceptually daring—mark him as a singular, pioneering figure. His projects demonstrate meticulous attention to construction detail, innovative experimentation, dialogue with the landscape, and historical sensitivity. In a period with few precedents for such interventions, Vidal i Arderiu exemplified an exceptional level of excellence and creativity, earning a discreet yet influential place in contemporary Catalan architecture.

Notes

1. The personal archive of architect Lluís M. Vidal i Arderiu (1939-2000) is preserved in his former professional studio in Barcelona and is currently managed by his family, in particular his daughter Anna Vidal, whom the authors wish to thank for her willingness to provide the material that made this article possible.

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