

When Ruins Speak

The Transformation of the Convent of Santa Maria do Bouro

Mariateresa Petino

Dipartimento di Architettura e Disegno Industriale “Luigi Vanvitelli”, Aversa (CE), mariateresa.petino@unicampania.it

Abstract

Adaptive reuse is configured, within the theoretical horizon of contemporary architecture, as a hermeneutical device capable of activating a dialectical confrontation between memory and design, between permanence and transformation. It stands in opposition to the logic of the *tabula rasa*, inscribing itself within an ontological conception of building, in which the site is understood not as an empty space available for use, but as a sedimentation of multiple temporalities. In this perspective, Eduardo Souto de Moura’s intervention on the Pousada Santa Maria do Bouro represents an exemplary declination of this ethical and phenomenological stance. The former Cistercian monastery, by then reduced to ruin, is not restored in the illusory restitutive sense of the term, but reactivated through a process of silent rewriting, which recognizes in the fragment the ontological condition of contemporary building. The project is founded on a principle of material and conceptual reticence: the existing stone is recovered, while the new elements are introduced with rigorous discretion, never aspiring to a formal totalization. Light, matter, and void become both interpretative and constructive instruments, configuring a spatiality that is not an aesthetic object, but a stratified phenomenological experience. In this operation, the ancient is neither fetishized nor dissolved, but assumed as an active interlocutor, in a dialogue that enables temporal continuity without nostalgia. The building, transformed into a hospitality structure, paradoxically preserves its symbolic status and even strengthens its communal vocation. Here, adaptive reuse is not only an architectural gesture, but a form of critical resistance against the commodification of heritage, its musealization, or its indiscriminate erasure. It is within this topology of listening that architecture reveals its capacity to inhabit time, to reconcile respect for memory with the vital demands of the present.

Keywords: Adaptive Reuse, Memory, Fragment

Introduction

«To subtract rather than to add means to recognize the essence of things and to communicate them in their essentiality (Munari 1968). In these words, by Bruno Munari lies a principle that transcends the domains of design and graphic art, where the author originally formulated it, to embrace the broader question of building and reuse. Simplifying does not mean impoverishing but exercising discernment: eliminating what is redundant in order to allow the truth of what remains to emerge. The act of subtraction thus becomes a cognitive gesture, a critical instrument through which essence reveals itself. Just as the

sculptor liberates form from a block of marble by removing the superfluous, so too the architect, when confronted with ruin, is called upon to discern, to distinguish, to subtract. Meaning is not generated by accumulation, but by the ability to recognize the essential. Applied to architecture, this logic immediately opens the discourse on ruin. Ruin is already subtraction: it has lost roofs, furnishings, functions, and what remains is not full but lack. Yet this lack is not sterile: it is an interpretative threshold. Benjamin, in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, defines ruin as a «dialectics at a standstill» (Benjamin 1928), a site where time does not unfold linearly but suspends itself, making fracture visible. Ruin is not total absence, but the trace of a past that resists. Blanchot, in *L'entretien infini*, insists that the fragment is not an isolated piece of a vanished whole, but that which resists totality, that which prevents the closure of meaning (Blanchot 1969). Thus, the fragment does not merely testify to what is missing: it becomes the very condition of thought. Cacciari, in *Geo-filosofia dell'Europa*, describes the city as an archipelago of fragments (Cacciari 1994), a disjointed constellation of remains that oblige us to interpretive labor. Derrida, with his notion of *trace*, emphasizes that every presence carries within itself an absence, that every building bears the memory of its own disappearance (Derrida 1967). Ruin, therefore, is not only a relic, but the living matter of the project. It is within this logic that Munari's principle acquires its force: subtraction becomes the only path toward rediscovering the essence of architecture. Not adding decorations, superstructures, or scenographies, but revealing the elemental structure, the originary condition that enables the place to continue to exist. Adaptive reuse inscribes itself in this horizon as a hermeneutical act: not a technical solution, but an interpretation. Heidegger, in *Bauen Wohnen Denken*, affirms that «to dwell means to safeguard» (Heidegger 1951). To safeguard is not to fix in museal immobility, but to keep alive, to allow presence to continue to speak. In contemporary architecture, reuse thus opposes both the logic of the *tabula rasa* and that of stylistic restoration, which seeks to recompose an idealized image. Plevoets and Van Cleempoel remind us that already in the nineteenth century the debate between Viollet-le-Duc and Ruskin had delineated two opposing poles: on one side creative restoration, on the other integral conservation (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel 2012). Contemporary adaptive reuse, however, proposes a third path: treating the building as an active resource, transformable without losing its identity. It is a practice that today also finds legitimacy in sustainability policies: the *Handbook for Circular and Adaptive Reuse* emphasizes how it reduces land consumption, valorizes existing resources, and reinforces cultural continuity (Handbook 2019). In this sense, Munari's thought, which called for simplification as a way of grasping the essential, anticipates an architectural stance that views subtraction not as a negative act, but as an act of responsibility. When intervening on ruin, the architect must exercise the same gesture as the designer or the sculptor: removing the superfluous, safeguarding what has value, transforming what can still live. Ruin, then, is not a void to be filled, but a fullness to be recognized in its essentiality.

The Cistercian Foundation

It is within this theoretical horizon that the case of Santa Maria do Bouro assumes its significance. Founded in the twelfth century by the Cistercians, the abbey was part of a network of monasteries that, radiating from Clairvaux, disseminated a model of life at once ascetic and economic. The Cistercians preferred secluded sites, close to water and fertile soil, so that spirituality might be interwoven with manual labor. The rule prescribed

a life ordered by the rhythm of prayer and agricultural work: *ora et labora* as the synthesis of an existence devoted both to community and to the land. Architecture reflected this spirituality: severe buildings, stripped of superfluous ornament, erected with local materials. The plan was rigorous: the church at the center, the cloister as a space of relation, the dormitories, refectories, and workrooms clustered around it. Beyond lay the mills, orchards, and fields. The abbey was a self-sufficient organism, in which spirituality and agriculture coexisted. As Lia Delgado has observed, the conventual typology «constructs the territory as a palimpsest of religious, productive, and symbolic functions» (Delgado 2012). Santa Maria do Bouro, situated in the valley of the Minho, embodied precisely this rule: formal sobriety, the use of local granite, and a profound relation to the landscape. For centuries it was both spiritual and economic center of the region, a point of reference for surrounding communities.

Modern and Baroque Transformations

In the modern centuries, especially between the seventeenth and eighteenth, the abbey of Bouro underwent a process of transformation that profoundly altered its appearance. The original austerity, marked by the Cistercian grammar of silence and sobriety, was progressively mitigated by enlargements and decorative insertions. The church was adapted to the Baroque taste: new side chapels, carved altars, polychrome wooden claddings, and *joanino* retables. The cloister, once the heart of monastic life, was enriched with more elaborate mouldings, while the cells and dormitories were modernized to meet the demands of an increasingly complex communal regime. These interventions were not mere “aesthetic additions,” but signs of an epochal shift. The Cistercian order, which in its first centuries had pursued rigor and essentiality, became part of a Counter-Reformation context that required greater representativity. Baroque architecture, with its scenographic forms, did not contradict the spiritual function, but reinterpreted it: the church was no longer only a place of recollection, but also of liturgical theatricality. In this sense, Bouro aligned itself with the transformation of many Portuguese convents, which in the seventeenth century assumed more articulated configurations, integrating spaces for hospitality, preaching, and interaction with the lay community. As Delgado notes, Iberian convents were never static entities, but «organisms capable of changing over time, adapting to the needs of the community and the political context» (Delgado 2012). Thus Bouro, while maintaining its Cistercian nucleus, was enriched with new volumes: the enlargement of lateral wings, the addition of wings devoted to economic functions, the redefinition of monumental entrances. The use of granite remained constant, yet the profiles became more complex, the mouldings more pronounced, the façades punctuated by regular windows. The Baroque also introduced a different relationship between building and territory. If the Cistercian logic had been one of almost invisible integration, grounded in continuity between architecture and landscape, the modern era accentuated the monastery’s visual impact, transforming it into a recognizable landmark within the rural fabric. The abbey was no longer only an agricultural center, but also a symbolic point of reference, a sign of power and prestige. This phase of transformation, however, did not erase Bouro’s deeper identity. The use of local granite and structural sobriety preserved the Cistercian memory. The monastery became a complex palimpsest in which medieval traces and Baroque insertions coexisted, rigor and theatricality, silence and representation. It was precisely this stratification that

would later render the condition of ruin more dramatic: the abandoned building was not a unitary block, but a heterogeneous assemblage of architectural languages, a mosaic of times and styles that decay would fragment further.

Abandonment and Ruin

The nineteenth century marked the decisive rupture. In 1834, with the suppression of the religious orders decreed by D. Pedro IV, Portugal saw in a matter of months the dissolution of a monastic network that had structured the territory for centuries. Monasteries were not only spiritual centers but also agricultural hubs, economic poles, and social and cultural references. The confiscation of ecclesiastical property had therefore not merely patrimonial consequences, but tore apart the rural and urban ecosystem. Bouro, deprived of the community that had given it sense and life, suddenly found itself empty, handed over to owners without the vision or resources to maintain it. Without monks, without liturgy, without agricultural labor, the building lost its very *raison d'être*. An architecture that for centuries had functioned as a living organism was reduced to an empty container. Parts of it were sporadically reused—agricultural stores, occasional shelters, improvised warehouses—but these appropriations did not produce new life; they accelerated the decline. With maintenance abandoned, roofs went unrepaired, walls lay exposed to the elements. In just a few decades, roofs collapsed, timber structures rotted, vaults opened to the rain. The cloisters, once the center of community life, became spaces of abandonment, invaded by weeds and shrubs that signaled the slow but inexorable return of nature. Stones loosened and fell, windows vanished, interiors became dilapidated spaces. The abbey ceased to be a building: it became a ruin. This metamorphosis was not only material but symbolic. Within a few decades Bouro passed from being a vital center to a phantasmal site, suspended in an ambiguous temporality, “no longer monastery, not yet other.” The community perceived it as remainder, as mute presence recalling what was no more. The *Área de Reabilitação Urbana de Bouro* document describes this condition with precision: «a complex in an advanced state of decay, with dismembered volumes and spaces overrun by spontaneous vegetation» (ARU Bouro 2016). Dormitories were reduced to perimeter walls, the church was stripped of its roofs, the refectories became inaccessible. Vegetation was not a simple natural element, but the sign of an inversion: culture gave way to nature, stone to earth, construction to ruin. By the second half of the twentieth century, the complex appeared as an abandoned landscape. Photographs taken before the intervention document isolated walls, missing roofs, and spaces engulfed by greenery: the image of a dismembered body, whose parts no longer composed an organism but the scattered relics of a vanished whole (fig. 1). And yet, precisely in this state of degradation, Bouro still retained an aura of testimony. The ruin spoke not only of the monastery that had been, but of the time that had traversed it: centuries of prayer, of agricultural labor, of Baroque transformations, of nineteenth-century decline. Each fragment was a trace, each remaining wall a memory. Not an emptiness to be filled, but a palimpsest of times, awaiting interpretation by a project capable of listening. But ruin is not silence. Benjamin describes it as a dialectics at a standstill; Blanchot, as an opening of sense; Derrida, as trace; Ricoeur, as reinterpreted memory; Agamben, as the darkness of the contemporary. All these readings converge in recognizing ruin as a form of time that obliges listening. At Bouro every cracked wall told its story. Fallen stones, overgrown cloisters, vaults open to the sky were not merely signs



Fig. 1. Convent of Santa Maria do Bouro before Souto de Moura's intervention (image kindly provided by architect Souto de Moura)

of decay, but testimonies of multiple temporalities: monastic time, modern time, time of abandonment. «The fragment is that which remains of a whole that cannot be recomposed» (Cacciari 1994).

A Project of Discretion and Measure

The contemporary project, when confronted with ruin, cannot attempt to reconstruct what has been lost. It must instead inhabit the fracture. As Lyotard observed, our epoch no longer unfolds through grand narratives, but through fragmented and partial ones (Lyotard 1981). In this sense, Santa Maria do Bouro could not return to being a monastery: it had to become something else, while preserving the trace of what it had been. This is the ontology of the fragment: meaning does not arise from unity, but from plurality. Architecture, therefore, must not erase discontinuity, but render it legible. Reduced to ruin, Bouro presented itself as a text open to interpretation. Souto de Moura accepts this condition and transforms the ruin from an obstacle into the very material of the project. The most radical and, at the same time, most restrained aspect of Souto de Moura's intervention lies in its discretion, understood not as renunciation but as measure. The architect approaches the complex without the ambition of reconstructing an idealized image, without imposing a formal gesture of rupture, and without resorting to stylistic mimicry. His operation is configured instead as an act of listening: an architecture that, as Cruz has written, "knows how to remain silent," having understood that the strength of the place lies precisely in its fragility (Cruz 2010). In this sense, Souto de Moura explicitly rejects both the Ruskinian attitude of

integral conservation and the Viollet-le-Ducian logic of stylistic restoration, opting for a third path grounded in critical continuity. As Diniz and Nunes have observed, this position corresponds to an “anonymity of the architect,” in which authorship withdraws in order to allow history and matter to speak (Diniz & Nunes 2016). This ethical and theoretical stance translates into a rigorously defined operational methodology. When the complex was entrusted to Souto de Moura, it was in a condition of advanced decay: collapsed roofs, structurally compromised walls, large lacunae in the cloister and conventual wings, and a total absence of technological infrastructure. The project was preceded by an extensive phase of metric, photographic, and stratigraphic surveys, aimed at distinguishing what could be conserved from what required integration. The guiding principle was not to recompose the image of the monastery as it once was, but to stabilize what time had left and to integrate only what was strictly necessary to render the complex habitable once again. The intervention therefore operates selectively within the gaps produced by collapse. Where the original granite masonry remained structurally sound, it was conserved and consolidated; where it was compromised, new stone walls were introduced; where it was irretrievably lost, entirely new volumes were inserted. The choice of local stone does not respond to a mimetic intention, but to a strategy of material and structural compatibility: stone ensures durability, mass, and continuity with the existing fabric. At the same time, the new masonry is deliberately distinguishable from the historic one, characterized by a more regular and precise texture. Difference is not concealed, but rendered legible through measure. The ruin thus becomes the distributive matrix of the project. The cloister remains the generative core of the complex, while the new rooms are arranged along the most intact conventual wings, following the original Cistercian circulation patterns. The *pousada* does not occupy the monastery as an alien program, but continues its internal logic. New floors and technical volumes are conceived as autonomous structures, deliberately set back from the historic walls, so as to preserve the legibility of the original thickness and avoid any structural overlap that might compromise the ancient fabric. This strategy of controlled proximity allows the new elements to support the old without absorbing or neutralizing it. Particular care is devoted to the insertion of technological systems. Installations are concentrated in service areas and new volumes, avoiding invasive interventions within the historic spaces. Where necessary, channels and technical voids are integrated into the floor structures, preserving the spatial continuity of corridors, cloisters, and communal rooms. The transformation into a hospitality structure thus occurs without altering the deep grammar of the monastic layout. Former cells become guest rooms while maintaining their introverted scale; circulation spaces retain their elongated and silent character; communal areas are organized around the cloister, which regains its central role as a space of encounter. Even the church, though deprived of its liturgical function, preserves its spatial centrality, becoming a place of representation without losing its austere atmosphere. Light and matter govern the new spatial experience. Openings are calibrated rather than emphasized; shadows are preserved rather than eliminated. In the corridors, penumbra dominates; in the rooms, light is reduced to essential planes; in the cloister, natural illumination marks the rhythm of time. The ancient granite remains the protagonist, entering into dialogue with concrete and wood according to a grammar of sobriety. As Cruz notes, the fragment in Souto de Moura’s work is not an aestheticized celebration of ruin, but a condition of truth: what is broken becomes constructive, what is missing opens a threshold of light (Cruz 2010). Here, the fragment is not a fetish, but a resource for new habitability.



Fig. 2. Interior view of the Pousada following the intervention by Souto de Moura (image kindly provided by architect Souto de Moura)

Conclusions

The transformation of Santa Maria do Bouro can only be understood within a broader philosophical and architectural framework in which ruin becomes a figure of time and the project assumes the role of a hermeneutic act. As Ricoeur reminds us, memory is never pure conservation, but always reinterpretation (Ricoeur 2000): what endures does not survive intact, but demands to be reread and translated into new forms. Derrida's notion of trace teaches that every presence is marked by absence (Derrida 1967), and that every ruin contains, in potency, the possibility of rewriting. Agamben defines as contemporary the one who is able to perceive the darkness of his own time (Agamben 2008). At Bouro, that darkness was ruin, transformed not into spectacle, but into inhabitable light. What distinguishes Souto de Moura's intervention is its capacity to restore the complex's communal vocation without resorting to musealization or commodification. The pousada does not reduce the monastery to touristic scenography, nor does it neutralize its historical density. Instead, it reactivates a form of hospitality already rooted in the monastic tradition, translating it into contemporary terms. The building once again becomes a place of collective experience, open to the territory and capable of generating continuity between past and present. In this sense, Santa Maria do Bouro stands as a form of critical resistance: resistance to the logic of the tabula rasa, to the aestheticization of ruin, and to the reduction of heritage to a consumable object. Ruin becomes inhabitable, memory becomes lived

experience. In the measured silence of its stone walls, Bouro continues to speak, offering a discreet but powerful lesson: the future of architecture is not built through erasure, but through a sustained dialogue with what remains.

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