

Memory. Territory. Identity

Church of Santa Maria do Castelo

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Abstract

The debate on methodologies of intervention in architectural heritage gained momentum from the late eighteenth century, alongside the emergence of the very notion of heritage itself. The central questions—why restore, what to restore, and how to restore—remain crucial today. From the outset, diverse approaches were considered: introducing contemporary alterations, leaving structures untouched, or reconstructing them archaeologically. Internationally, the 1964 Venice Charter introduced a new concept of intervention, distinct from the existing object, contributing to its valorisation. Many reuse projects, however, neutralised original structures, reducing them to mere “containers” for new functions. Although respectful of the past, such practices still enabled the consolidation of heritage contexts. In the 1970s, debates resurfaced, challenging the rigidity of the Venice Charter and advocating for case-by-case planning, supported by multidisciplinary teams and tailored safeguarding strategies. The Krakow Charter of 2000 later addressed landscapes and historic centres, urging integrated approaches to tangible and intangible heritage, and highlighting cultural tourism as both an opportunity and a risk. Today, cultural tourism has become the main justification for interventions. While often regarded as a solution to the challenges facing heritage contexts, it must be approached with caution. The same tourism that fosters local development can also distort the perception and consumption of heritage sites. This is evident in the musealisation of architecture, particularly in ruins such as the Church of Santa Maria do Castelo in Castelo Mendo. Here, exposure as an object of display risks disconnecting the monument from its original meanings, weakening its role in collective memory. Considering memory as a human repository guiding intervention, it becomes necessary to question the design choices behind the successive works at this church—especially the decision to preserve and consolidate it as a ruin within the wider framework of the *Historical Villages of Portugal Programme*. Within this framework, the case is discussed as a critical contribution to the debate on adaptive reuse, questioning whether the deliberate preservation of ruin may itself constitute a conscious design strategy.

Keywords: Castelo Mendo, Memory, Architectural Restoration

Introduction

«We may live without her [architecture], and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her. How cold is all history, how lifeless all imagery, compared to that which the living nation writes, and the uncorrupted marble bears! How many pages of doubtful

record might we not often spare, for a few stones left one upon another! The ambition of the old Babel builders was well directed for this world: there are but two strong conquerors of the forgetfulness of men, Poetry and Architecture» (Ruskin 1989).

Thus wrote John Ruskin in 1857, in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, articulating his vision of the substance and purpose of architecture, which he considered, like poetry, to be one of the few forces capable of overcoming the forgetfulness of humankind.

Indeed, nearly a century and a half later, although the general perspective on the relationship between architecture and memory may no longer be as definitive or impassioned, it is undeniable that conservation becomes imperative when the testimonies of the past that fascinate and inspire us threaten to collapse, disintegrate, or cease to exist physically. This imperative arises because we wish to keep alive the physical evidence of the objects that constitute our memories; we cannot, nor do we wish to, allow this heritage—this inheritance—to disappear. Perhaps because these objects existed before us, proving the continuity of architecture, or perhaps because we recognize in them timeless qualities—space, volume, proportion, detail – we regard them as worthy of survival, as testimony and demonstration of the questions that have always accompanied humanity: from the primal need to build for shelter to the successive layers of meaning added to the act of building.

The chosen case study reflects, much like other interventions carried out under the *Historical Villages of Portugal Programme*, the need to recover these territories as living environments and as cultural capital, shareable through the individual and collective memories of us all. At the same time, however, it also reflects a valorisation strategy supported by cultural tourism, conceived as the main instrument for cultural, social, and economic revitalization—a means of countering the negative effects of decline and depopulation.

Within this programme, the intervention in the Church of Santa Maria do Castelo in Castelo Mendo represents a particularly compelling case study. Initially, the plan envisaged its recovery and adaptation into a museum space of a sacred nature. The final project, however, reflected a distinct methodological choice: the intervention was limited to conserving and consolidating the existing ruin, even including certain demolitions. Was this design choice a deliberate and meaningful approach, assuming the ruin as a mediating process between memory and architecture? Or was it merely the consequence of budgetary constraints or adjustments to a programme that never fully achieved success across all its intended dimensions—especially in terms of social, cultural, and economic revitalization, a reality easily confirmed when visiting the village?

The existing documentation does not provide unequivocal answers to these questions, hence the need for further investigation into this church.

Beyond a conservation-oriented reading, the intervention in the Church of Santa Maria do Castelo is here interpreted within the broader field of adaptive reuse. The decision to stabilise the ruin without assigning a new function raises critical questions about reuse through non-transformation, restraint, and the suspension of programmatic resolution.

Within this perspective, the intervention can be read in relation to contemporary debates on adaptive reuse, understood not only as functional transformation but also as a critical design approach to existing structures (Cantacuzino; Douglas; Plevoeets and Van Cleempoel).

Castelo Mendo | Context

Location: Castelo Mendo lies in the district of Guarda, 19 km southwest of Almeida, on a

granite massif at an elevation of 756 meters. It overlooks the Côa valley, with access via the IP5 and N16 roads; the Beira Alta railway halt is located 3.5 km away.

Brief Historical Background: founded in the Middle Ages and granted a charter in 1229, Castelo Mendo has long been associated with frontier defence. Its medieval walls and castle reflect the Christian Reconquest and the border disputes with León and Castile. Following the Treaty of Alcañices (1297), it remained part of the Beira defensive network until the seventeenth century. Over time, restoration works were undertaken, but subsequent decline followed, exacerbated by the French invasions and the Liberal Wars. In the twentieth century, limited works consolidated walls and roofs. Under the Historical Villages of Portugal Programme, the rehabilitation of heritage and public spaces brought modest revitalization. Today, it remains a rural village, occasionally visited for its historical significance.

Urban Structure: the drawings by Duarte d'Armas produced in the early sixteenth century (Fig. 1), clearly depict the image of Castelo Mendo and allow us to conclude that the village's urban profile has not undergone significant alterations from that time to the present day.

The village constitutes an enclosed space, connected to the exterior through gates opened in the surrounding wall to the north, west, and east, with access reinforced by towers.

Inside, the logic of occupation is based on the layout of two structuring road axes: the path

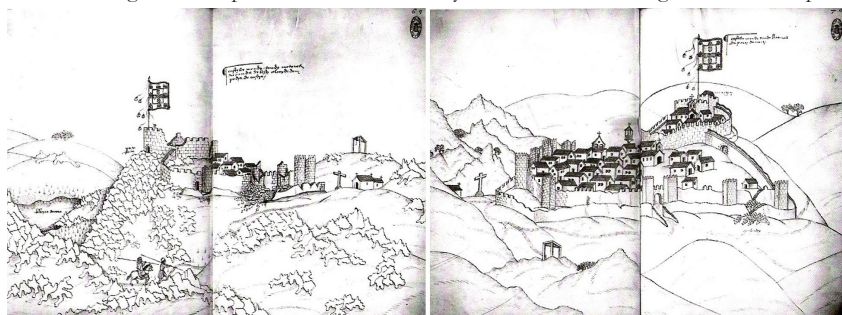


Fig. 1. Views of Castelo Mendo (16th century) (drawings by d'Armas, 1990)

that runs around the walled perimeter, and the main thoroughfare which, linking the Porta da Vila to the Castle, defines the central and unifying axis of the former municipal seat – the Rua Direita. From this street unfolds the entire communication network, composed of transversal streets, along which constructions align in a compact manner and at the rhythm imposed by the uneven topography, resulting in irregular blocks and narrow, winding streets punctuated by steps and slopes.

The squares, as focal points of social life, open onto Rua Direita: Largo de São Vicente, at the entrance to the village; Largo do Pelourinho, already situated within a more central area of the urban fabric; and, finally, Largo de Nossa Senhora do Castelo.

The village demonstrates a history of architectural investment, attested by the constructive quality and aesthetic care of certain buildings. Religious structures, together with public buildings—symbols of political power and civil order (the Town Hall and Jail, and the Pillory)—define a space where the wealthier local families also built their residences.

Nevertheless, the population living within the walls also depended on the exterior for their daily activities. It was outside the walls that fountains and waterspouts were located, as

well as the places where occasional events took place, such as fairs or certain celebrations associated with Catholic worship (the Calvary).

As with the network of fortifications that defended the C^oa frontier, Castelo Mendo always retained a markedly medieval character, not only because this coincided with the time of its institutional foundation, but also because weak urban dynamics did not encourage ruptures or significant transformations.

Indeed, from an initial spatial organization, one can identify a structure whose growth occurred gradually. The consolidation process also resulted from a series of alterations that, though sometimes minor, cumulatively gave rise to the form and character of the spaces we know today.

Natural and Built Heritage: Castelo Mendo constitutes an urban ensemble of medieval character and high architectural quality, protected by imposing walls. As a former municipal seat until the mid-nineteenth century, its historical importance can be observed in the presence of several notable heritage elements.

The village was classified as a Property of Public Interest in 1984. Later, Castelo Mendo was included in the Historical Villages of Portugal Recovery Programme, launched in 1984 within the framework of the Community Support Framework II (QCA II). Its objectives included, among others, «overcoming the negative effects of degradation and depopulation, contributing to strengthening the self-esteem of the populations and to enhancing the significance of these villages for the country as a whole and even abroad, promoting them as destinations within qualified tourist circuits. The aim is not only to transform these villages into visitable sites, but also to make them habitable places, which requires cultural and socio-economic, revitalization, always taking their residents into account» (Reis, n.d.). Since the enhancement of historical and cultural heritage was the essential purpose of the programme, the action sought to «respond in an integrated way to the problems affecting the rural world, with the aim of recovering, revitalizing, and regenerating spaces rich in heritage, culture, and tradition» (Mota, n.d.). The selection of villages was based on a set of criteria, including the presence of significant archaeological, environmental, or architectural heritage; the existence and formal unity of the urban fabric and built structures; the symbolic and historical-cultural relevance of the site; its socio-economic and demographic importance and dynamics; its potential for attractiveness; and the possibility of integration into thematic cultural-tourism circuits, stimulating their operation as a network.

It was within this context that an intervention strategy was developed for Castelo Mendo, comprising several actions designed to promote its revitalization as a whole, «conceiving its walled space as a unique “object” whose dissemination should allow the development of tourist and socio-cultural activities, within the framework of an extended itinerary of the fortresses of the municipality of Almeida» (1).

Among the various interventions carried out in this historic nucleus under the programme, particular note should be given to the consolidation and conservation of the Church of Santa Maria do Castelo, a project that will be analysed in detail.

Church of Santa Maria do Castelo | The Intervention within the Historical Villages of Portugal Programme (1999-2000)

The village of Castelo Mendo presents a scarce, fragmented, and poorly documented record of interventions. Some data, however, confirm works carried out by the Directorate-

General for Buildings and National Monuments, consisting mainly of the consolidation of sections of the wall, the reconstruction and reinforcement of certain elements of the pillory, roof repairs, and other restoration procedures aimed at minimizing damage and mitigating the harmful effects of time and adverse weather conditions. One such event was a storm which, according to documentation from the Architectural Heritage Information System dated 6 February 1946 (2), caused the roof of the Church of Santa Maria do Castelo to collapse.

Other documentary records, dating from the late 1940s and early 1950s and archived in the same system, reveal extensive correspondence between the Directorate-General for Buildings and National Monuments and the Directorate-General of Public Finance—Department of Heritage. These documents outline the interventions planned at the time for Castelo Mendo, with particular emphasis on the Church of Santa Maria do Castelo.

The records reveal a certain indecision regarding the most appropriate intervention for the building, which was already in an advanced state of ruin, aggravated by the loss of its roof during the storm. Faced with the «state of abandonment and complete ruin in which the church finds itself» (3), the two entities considered several options. These included transferring the property to the ecclesiastical authorities to reopen it for Catholic worship—which would have required major restoration works—or, alternatively, since the building, although classified, was not considered of particular value, carrying out only the essential repairs necessary to prevent total collapse. In this scenario, the existing altars would be handed over to the Diocese of Guarda, on the condition that they be used in another regional church or placed in a museum of sacred art, which was authorized in 1952.

From these records it is clear that, whether because the building was not deemed especially valuable or due to budgetary constraints, priorities at the time were focused more on consolidating the village walls and gates. Consequently, during that rehabilitation campaign, the movable assets of the Church of Santa Maria do Castelo were safeguarded (although the correspondence described them as of «little artistic merit and in poor condition»), while the intervention on the building itself was limited to minor roof repairs, sufficient only to protect the interior as much as possible from rainwater infiltration (4).

Later records indicate the existence of an *Urban and Architectural Recovery Study for Castelo Mendo* (José Antunes Silva and José Manuel Fernandes, 1979), which proposed restoring the building for religious purposes.

However, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s—after the village had been included in the *Historical Villages of Portugal Recovery Programme*—those new proposals emerged for the church. These were integrated into a plan aimed at revitalizing the entire settlement from a holistic perspective, treating the historic core as a whole whose promotion would enable the development of tourism and socio-cultural activities. Within this framework, several actions were proposed, ranging from the requalification of public spaces to interventions in specific buildings, among them the Church of Santa Maria do Castelo.

The intervention programme effectively envisaged the recovery and adaptation of the ruin into a museum space with a sacred component, as well as the redevelopment of its surrounding urban area. This would have been carried out in partnership between the Municipality of Almeida and the Directorate-General for Buildings and National Monuments.

However, the intentions expressed in the intervention plan were not fully implemented.

The church underwent only consolidation and conservation works, in accordance with the project prepared by the Directorate-General for Buildings and National Monuments in 1996.

The project drawings refer solely to the dismantling of an interior wall, with the stones reused to consolidate other areas. New metal-grille doors were also designed for installation in the openings of the north and west façades, and the interior finishes were removed. This position aligns with contemporary debates on adaptive reuse that recognise non-intervention and minimal action as legitimate design approaches.

Conclusions

Starting from a brief contextualization of the case study presented, it becomes clear that, in the context of interventions on heritage assets such as the Church of Santa Maria do Castelo, the importance of the ensemble must always be respected. Figures 2–4 highlight the close relationship between the Church of Santa Maria do Castelo, the fortified village, and the surrounding landscape. This spatial and symbolic continuity supports a reading of the intervention that extends beyond the building itself, situating it within a broader territorial and cultural framework. This aligns with the historical evolution of heritage concepts, insofar as the attention given to a monument arises from the recognition of the importance of context in heritage valorisation—that is, when monuments are understood not only as isolated elements but also, and above all, in relation to their surroundings.

This church is one such case, standing out for its strong relationship with the landscape and the historic nucleus in which it is embedded—a factor that greatly influenced the definition of the intervention strategy within the *Historical Villages of Portugal Recovery Programme*. The initial plan envisaged its recovery and adaptation into a museum space of a sacred nature, as well as the redevelopment of its surroundings. However, the intervention carried out in 1999–2000 was limited to conservation and enhancement works, including façade consolidation, treatment of wall edges, joint repointing, pavement levelling, roof reconstruction, and repair of the side chapel ceiling.

The divergence between the intentions expressed in the intervention programme and the project decisions actually implemented raises pertinent questions – not only about the reasons for this divergence but, above all, about the underlying rationale and methodology of the final project. On the one hand, the choice not to transform, thereby crystallising a state of ruin, can elevate the object to the abstract condition of a work of art or historical document. On the other hand, as Giorgio Bonsanti argues, restoration should be an activity oriented towards transmitting a cultural asset to the future, ensuring its survival and use while respecting its particular identity—a combination of originality and integrity—within a multidisciplinary conservation project. In this sense, it is legitimate to ask: what is the most appropriate way to transmit this heritage to future generations? Which design approach best defines the monument as a physical medium between memory and architecture—the consolidation of the ruin, or its rehabilitation and adaptation to a new functional use, even one related to its original religious role?

From the *projectual silence* of the first option to the active and transformative intervention of the second, decision-making in such cases is inevitably complex. Each subject has its own character, its own specific issues, and its own expression. At the level of buildings, cities, and territory, the architecture of the coming years will certainly be marked by the

practice of recovery. Within this context, it must be recognized that there is an infinite range of possible solutions, and that today it is the responsibility of the architect—as both decision-maker and agent of transformation—to establish criteria of intervention based on the specific reality of each case. This reality inevitably leaves us with the unease of doubt, the anguish of decision, and the heavy responsibility of transmitting heritage to future generations.

From the perspective of adaptive reuse, this case demonstrates that reuse does not necessarily imply functional conversion. The consolidation of ruin can operate as a deliberate project decision, privileging memory, spatial openness, and critical distance over occupation and programmatic completion. Such an approach challenges conventional expectations of reuse and highlights the role of the architect in defining thresholds between intervention, restraint, and abandonment. This position aligns with recent interpretations of adaptive reuse that recognise restraint, non-intervention, and the preservation of ruin as legitimate architectural strategies (Brooker and Stone; Plevoets and Van Cleempoel).

These doubts continue to shape a methodological critique of interventions on pre-existing structures, bringing us back, time and again, to the three fundamental questions: Why restore? What to restore? How to restore?



Fig. 2. Castelo Mendo (Rita Vasco, 2022)



Fig. 3. Church of Santa Maria do Castelo, Castelo Mendo (Rita Vasco, 2022)



Fig. 4. Church of Santa Maria do Castelo, Castelo Mendo (Rita Vasco, 2022)

Notes

1. In Comissão de Coordenação da Região Centro – *Programa das Aldeias Históricas de Portugal*.
2. Processo PT020902080015 | documento SIPA TXT.00889473
3. Processo PT020902080015 | documento SIPA TXT.008894977
4. Processo PT020902080015 | documento SIPA TXT.00889516

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