

**The origins of library:  
monastic scribe work as a different type of prayer**

Jekaterina Balysuk  
Msc3 studio Roosenberg, Spring 2017  
Irene Cieraad Research Seminar AR3AI 055  
18-05-2017

## Introduction

The new study centre, as a new function for the Abbey Roosenberg of Dom Hans van Der Laan, suppose to house students and/or professionals from KU Leuven university in Belgium. However, this program is only the frame for its actual function. Therefore, I was curious to look at the origins of monastic libraries and the way they operate. On one hand, it could assist in outlining the formation of libraries, on the other, give directions and inspirations for the new program of the abbey. In a matter of fact, monastic libraries not only recall the aspects of learning, but also reveal the specifics of the daily practices of the monks.

---

The history of books and libraries in monasteries can be traced back to the beginning of Christian monasticism in the deserts of Egypt. Although, the true library era of the Christian world began early in the sixth century with the publication of the *Rule of St Benedict*<sup>1</sup>. Wherever a Benedictine house arose or a monastery of anyone of the orders, which were nothing more nor less than branches of the Benedictine tree, books were transcribed and multiplied, thus forming libraries small at first but increasing as monasteries developed. Those monastic libraries had not only impact on the history of Western culture as it laid a foundation for modern libraries we see today. In a matter of fact, Benedictine monasteries were considered as early education centers and gave general directions for study.

However, what triggers my attention is the fact, that in a life of Benedictine monks, next to the manual labor, there was always a literary one. In the practice of *monachism*<sup>2</sup>, together with the silence and prayer, there was always a time designated for reading books and learning. The process of 'making' (transcribing books) and the literary routine, was not only an important aspect of the daily life of the monk, it also started to obtain a different meaning. As Herman Peterson in his article "The Genesis of Monastic libraries" asserted, that reading books was necessary as a specific form of prayer<sup>3</sup>. Thus, this paper examines the development of medieval libraries and the way they were operated, together unfolding the relation between reading, scribe work and monastic routines.

---

1 This rule is explained further on in this paper.

2 Monachism – the religious and work activities of a monk.

3 Peterson 2010: 320.

## Benedictine monachism and the literary labor

The most important figure of the early Western monasticism was Benedict of Nursia who in 529 A.D. founded the most famous monastery of Monte Cassino<sup>4</sup> between Rome and Naples. St. Benedict founded the first regular monastic order and gave to his order and through it to the Western monachism in general, a definite rule which in time supplanted all others.

The spirit of St. Benedict's Rule is summed up in the motto of the Benedictine Confederation: pax ("peace") and the traditional ora et labora ("pray and work"). With the vows of obedience, poverty and chastity St. Benedict laid down a daily routine of monastic life and added a manual labor. The meaning of the labor meant serving to the community and for the bigger purpose. Before the time of Benedict, the hermits devoted all their spare time to tending the farms connected with the monasteries, but with the Benedictine rule was introduced external labor, either manual or literary. The routine of the monastic day of the Benedictine orders was to include seven hours for manual labor and two hours for reading as is shown in the forty-eighth chapter<sup>5</sup> of the Rule of St. Benedict where it says:

*"Idleness is the enemy of the soul: hence brethren ought, at certain seasons to occupy themselves with manual labor and again at certain hours with holy reading. Therefore between Easter and the Calends of October let them apply themselves to reading from the fourth till near the sixth hour. After the sixth hour when they rise from the table let them rest on their beds in complete silence; or if anyone should wish to read to himself let him do so in such a way as not to disturb anyone else. From the Calends of October to the beginning of Lent let them apply themselves to reading until the second hour. During Lent let them apply themselves to reading from morning until the end of the third hour, and in these days of Lent let them receive a book a piece from the library and read it straight through."*

As we see, reading is described as a routine which must be done in a specific time and different in the specific seasons. It was a basic monastic practice to not only read and learn but to be alone, 'read to himself', contemplate, understand.

Consequently, the instruction to read became an important aspect of the Benedictine monachism. Therefore, the need for books was growing together with the amount of monks. As a result, scribe work, which consisted chiefly not in the production of original literature but in the reproduction and preservation of the literature that had come down from earlier writers, was accepted not only as a part of the manual labor prescribed in the rule, but also as a portion of the routine of religious life.

---

<sup>4</sup> Monte Cassino is a rocky hill about 130 kilometres southeast of Rome, Italy, 2 kilometres to the west of the town of Cassino.

<sup>5</sup> Full translation of the rule of St. Benedict: [www.osb.org](http://www.osb.org).

### Scriptoriums and the spaces of medieval library

With the development of monasticism the habitation of monks was changing too. The early idea of monachism was the complete seclusion of the individual from all other individuals, for sole purpose of fasting and prayer, thus making a single but sufficient for the hermit. The later idea was the seclusion from the world not only of the individual but of a body of monks under one head, who did not as in the earlier days wholly give themselves up to spiritual contemplation, but devoted a greater part of their time to manual labor and reading. This development necessitated a provision for a common abode and place of worship, so that as early as the third century the monks lived in conventual buildings, the principal one of which was the church. Mostly, the church<sup>6</sup> was a cross one with nave and aisles and a central tower. Also transepts, choir and a retro-choir. The cloister was mostly on the south side of the church, while the chapter house – always on the east side of the court.

To no surprise, the first germ of the library was found in the apse near the altar of the early Christian churches, in a little cupboard full of service books. When the collection of books grew, they were located in the cloisters of the church. During the medieval period the system was devoted to the double purpose of library and *scriptorium* (a special room described further) a whole walk or alley of the cloister, usually that nearest the church, as that was the driest and warmest portion of the conventual building. Along one side of this alley books were fixed against the wall oak cupboards, called *armaria*, with strong locks and hinges.

For the transcribing of the manuscripts there had to be a special place and it was known as scriptorium – a specific room entirely devoted for this activity. It consisted either of one large room or of separate little study spaces, called *carrels*, with a window to each compartment and with one side fully open to the cloister walls. All carrels were under the general discipline of the monastery but also was supervised by a special officer known as the *Armarius* (he also was a librarian). His duty was to provide all the necessary tools for transcribing (ink, parchment, pens, rulers, etc.). The rules of the scriptorium were very strict. Artificial light was entirely forbidden for fear of injuring the manuscripts and no one was allowed to enter the room besides scribes and the higher officers of the abbey. Absolute silence was preferred, but as some method of communication was necessary there was a variety of signs.

The amount of transcribed books grew and the rooms storing them were also changing. The result was that the small room, devoted for some time to the storing of the books was not large enough for the collections and the books had to be packed in various parts of the monastery without order or selection in cases set up wherever a vacant corner could be found. This general confusion and great inconvenience naturally led to the provision for larger library quarters so that in the later and larger monasteries we find two or three rooms, one floor or sometimes even two floors of a conventual building devoted entirely to the storage of books. Mary H. Kittredge<sup>7</sup> in her article "Monastic libraries" gives a very detailed account of these rooms:

---

<sup>6</sup> Kittredge 1901: 3.



*These rooms of the medieval monastic library were usually long and narrow with equi-distant windows and with bookcases arranged at right angles with the walls in the spaces between each pair of windows, a method illustrated by the stack room of our modern library. In these rooms book-cases varied in style from those used in the early days when books were stored in the cloister in that cases with locked doors now gave place to an elongated lectern or desk of convenient height for a seated reader, with shelves either beneath or above according as to whether the books lay on their sides or stood upright. To still provide for the safety of the volumes and to take the place of the locked doors of the primitive book-cases, the books were chained to the desks. This system of chaining allowed books to be readily taken down and laid on the desk for reading as the chains were of different lengths according to the distance of the shelf from the table<sup>8</sup>.*

### The scribe work

The transcribing of books was a very specific process that had to be carefully carried out<sup>9</sup>. After the above mentioned armarius had provided all the necessary tools, he took to the scribe the section of plain parchment, in separate sheets but in the particular order for the binding later. First the general size and style was decided upon, then, scribe had to rule the sheets (pricking holes and made the margins). Afterwards, scribe copied letter by letter without any alteration or correction even if the original writing was wrong. There was never paging but just a division into pockets of parchment leaves. After finishing, another monk compared the scribe's writing with the original copy. If the work was correct the sheets were then given to the *rubricator*, who inserted titles, notes, liturgical directions and list of chapters.

The manuscript afterwards went to the *illuminator*, or illustrator, who was illustrating the books (different first letters, making engravings). He would trace the outline with the pencil made of silver or brass with a silver point and then would go over this metallic outline with fine quill pen dipped in preparation of lamp black and gum. Later would follow the gilding and penciling and inserting a touches of gold which, in fact, was finishing of the whole book.

After book comes from the illuminator, it would go to the binder. Books used in a service of church were bound in skins of deer or sheep stretched over solid boards and sewed with strips of the same material (for or five bands across the back of the book). The finest books were bound in ivory, silver or gold and could be even set with jewels.

---

7 Mary H. Kittredge in her article "Monastic libraries" gives an extensive description on how medieval libraries functioned and introduces its short history.

8 Kittredge 1901: 13.

9 Kittredge 1901: 7.

## Conclusions

From the early days monks showed a real passion for books and libraries and they did not spare any time, labor or money to secure the important manuscripts. As a matter of fact, the scribe work was not only the manual labor that was important for the continuation of literacy in the monasteries, but it also was a part of a very specific practice in a daily life of the monk. In the introduction I have mentioned, that literary labor was necessary as a different type of prayer. However, I believe that the scribe work can be also interpreted as a type of meditation or prayer, as it follows a very special way of working and making. In addition, this type of labor indeed served for a bigger purpose and was useful for the wealth and development of the whole community.

As a matter of fact, I do believe that Abbey Roosenberg could expand its program and relate it to artists and architects, as their daily routines are very much related to the act of 'making' and producing as well. For this reason, to add a space for artists where they can work and 'make' could be not only functionally important but also give a very specific character to the new function of the Abbey in Waasmunster.

## References:

Clark J.W.

1894 *Libraries in the medieval and Renaissance period*. Cambridge: Macmillan and Bowes.

Peterson, Herman

2010 "The Genesis of Monastic libraries", *Libraries & the Cultural Record*. Vol. 45, No. 3: 320-332.

Kittredge, Mary Harriett

1901 *Monastic libraries*. Illinois: University of Illinois.

Rochardson, Ernest Cushing

1905 "The Medieval library", *Harper's magazine*. Vol. April 1905: 788-798.

Internet sources:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monte\\_Cassino](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monte_Cassino) (16-5-2017)

<http://www.osb.org/rb/text/rbemjo3.html#48> (15-3-2017)

<http://medievalwriting.50megs.com/author/monasticscribe.htm> (19-4-2017)

## **The study and congress centre in Abbey Roosenberg**

Jekaterina Balysuk  
Msc3 studio Roosenberg, Spring 2017  
Irene Cieraad Research Seminar AR3AI 055  
01-06-2017

## Introduction

This last report is my personal dispute on how I envision the new program of Abbey Roosenberg. I will overview several aspects to make my argument more clear and accountable. Firstly, I will explain the relation between the new function proposed by KU Leuven and the Abbey itself. Here I want to give the opinion on this proposal and show how this program relates to my notions. Secondly, I will elaborate on practicalities and specifics of the new program. Lastly, I want to describe the relation of new extension vis-à-vis the existing building. Consequently, this paper should be a reasoned account on my individual decisions and how KU Leuven and abbey could benefit from this particular proposal.

## New function of Abbey Roosenberg in relation to KU Leuven

Recently, KU Leuven university not only became an official 'guard' of the Abbey Roosenberg, it also announced its particular users and the new purpose:

*On 18 December, the KU Leuven and the Mariazusters of Franciscus signed the principle agreement with which the university officially joined the VZW, which owns the Abbey of Roosenberg. This abbey in Waasmunster becomes a new study and congress center in the fields of architecture and art. <..> The university will be responsible for the maintenance and restoration of the building. <..> It will be a breeding ground for reflection and new forms of education, where academics, architects and artists of the Faculty of Architecture of Campus St. Lucas Ghent and the Fine Arts Education of LUCA School of Arts will work together.<sup>1</sup>*

Indeed, KU Leuven chose to focus on architects and artists, as, in their believe, they are the best candidates that could benefit from this sacred place. The argumentation for this choice also came from the former use of a monastery which was not only a house of Maria Sisters but also a guest place for reflection and work: *in recent years, more and more artists and architects have found their way to the abbey to study or work there. This has to do with her architectural value: it is a unique building and classified monument designed by the internationally renowned architect, Dom Hans van der Laan. Together with the extensive park forest where the abbey is located, the building invites for contemplation and reflection.*

However, does only architects and artists can profit from such a distinct place? On one hand, KU Leuven is a research university with many satellite campuses [figure 1] spread throughout Belgium, making it the largest university of the country and offering a broad variety of study programs: sciences, engineering, humanities, medicine, law, and social sciences. Consequently, it could make abbey not only a place for the specifically selected users but as a representative one for the whole university. On the other, this monastery indeed has a very distinct architectural value which, in my opinion, makes it an important aspect to look at and I would like to explain it in more detail.

---

1 Translation from the dutch language, <http://nieuws.kuleuven.be>. Later translations are also taken from this news-brief.



- > [Leuven](#)
- > [Campus Groep T Leuven](#)
- > [Technologiecampus De Nayer Sint-Katelijne-Waver](#)
- > [Technologiecampus Geel](#)
- > [Campus Sint-Andries Antwerpen](#)
- > [Campus Carolus Antwerpen](#)
- > [Technologiecampus Aalst](#)
- > [Technologiecampus Gent](#)
- > [Campus Sint-Lucas Gent](#)
- > [Campus Sint-Lucas Brussel](#)
- > [Campus Brussel](#)
- > [Technologiecampus Oostende](#)
- > [Campus Brugge](#)
- > [Campus Kulak Kortrijk](#)
- > [Technologiecampus Diepenbeek](#)

**Figure 1.** Satellite campuses KU Leuven,  
source: <https://www.kuleuven.be/studentenvoorzieningen>.

Personally to me, the architecture of van der Laan requires reflection and understanding. It takes time to develop the idea about his designs and initial intentions. Especially trying to apprehend the meaning of his works today. Obviously, this abbey is a timeless reference that not only represents the architectural approach of van der Laan but also his personal life as a monk, philosopher and architect. His ideas, for which he devoted most time of his life, were more present than actual implementations. And still, he left several 'real' reflections – his buildings – for us to experience. Of course, I am telling it from my own point of view as a future architect who definitely sees it in a more sensitive way. However, I believe it is one of the reasons why I do agree that proposed program matches the future expectations. It is thoughtful to devote it to architects and artists who are not only in a constant process of reflection and rethinking of their work so it could be a perfect medium for this. Also, it could become a platform to assess and reflect on works of van der Laan representing his architecture and monastic life.

Accordingly, the idea to propose a different way of learning also suits these intentions. I envision it to be accomplished with arranging special programs, more course-type learning, which allows students and professionals reflect occasionally with a specific research or assignments. In a matter of fact, abbey is in a remote location which makes it difficult to accommodate students for a long term as they are still engaged with studies at university campus.

A good example of how such courses could be organized is Frans Masereel centre in Belgium. Despite the fact that it is an artist residency (specifically the ones related to graphic medium) and it

does not belong to university, it provides a clear overview of residency types and what can be achieved having a very specific goal and function.

This centre has 4 types of residencies:

- 1) Research residency. Period: 8 weeks. Aimed at the research of graphic medium.
- 2) General residency. Period: 4-6 weeks. An artist or designer realizes a print project that matches his or her own oeuvre. Individual projects.
- 3) Essay residency. Period: 4 weeks. Critics, artists and theoreticians can reside and at the centre to write a critical text on a print related topic.
- 4) School residency. Period 1-2 weeks. For universities with a master degree program (or third year Bachelor) to work on a contemporary print-related project.

As we see, those residencies last no longer than two months and are related to a specific researcher – the user. In this case, student residency is the shortest but in the case of Abbey Roosenberg, it could be reversed (students stay longest) and also more aimed at students than professionals.

Another interesting aspect about the Frans Masereel centre is that it has a broader focus on research, similar to the idea of different way of learning. Centre organizes different graphic projects like exhibitions, open portfolio sessions, print related presentations, guided tours, etc. For this reason, the new academic study centre in Waasmunster could invite guests and be open to community and representation. After all, its former purpose was not only the home for a small contemplative community of monastery sisters, but also a place for guests and hospitality.

Finally, I would like to end with the argument I made in my previous report about the origins of the library. I have explained that scribe work and literary labor could be interpreted as a new form of prayer which follows a special way of working and living. For this reason, it could be alluded to the work and routine of the architect or artist too. The precision and devotion to the specific project or assignment relates to the one of the monk's, both having the specific rhythm and routine of 'making'.

#### Specificities of the program

The program of the abbey and new extension I am willing to propose is in accordance to KU Leuven: a study and congress centre for architects and artists where they can work, reflect and make the best out of this superior location and architectural presence.

The new extension to this building is necessary as abbey has its own limitations and restrictions. There are physical restrictions: for example, not all sizes of spaces are suitable for specific reuse like concert hall or big workshop space, also sound restrictions (as the only place where nuns could talk loudly was a courtyard), the amount of living space or even not enough facilities for individual living (showers or toilets). Also, cognitive limitations: change of interior materials, furniture or even light seem to change the experience of the space irreversibly.

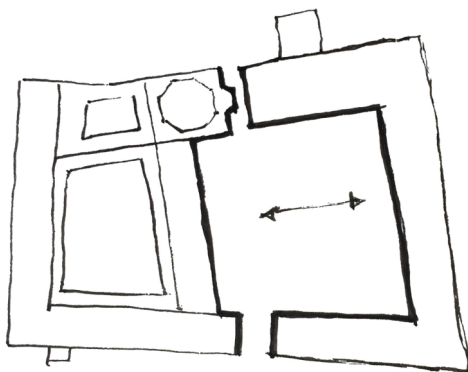
For this reason, I want to divide functions of the abbey and extension in two parts. The first one is the monastery (abbey) that is used as a longer stay facility where students and professors would be engaged with the project or assignment for the specific period of time (1 week to 1 month for example). Here they will have all the facilities for the daily life and some private study spaces for personal reflection. The other part is extension which works more as an external 'party' for visiting professors and professionals from various fields that would come there for a lecture or presentation weekend. Here I will include presentation hall, workshop space (which is more a transformable multi-purpose unit), some special-purpose rooms (such as 'dark room' for photography). Accordingly, additional accommodation is going to be provided. Consequently, I believe that it makes the most efficient use of both facilities.

### The new extension vis-à-vis Abbey Roosenberg

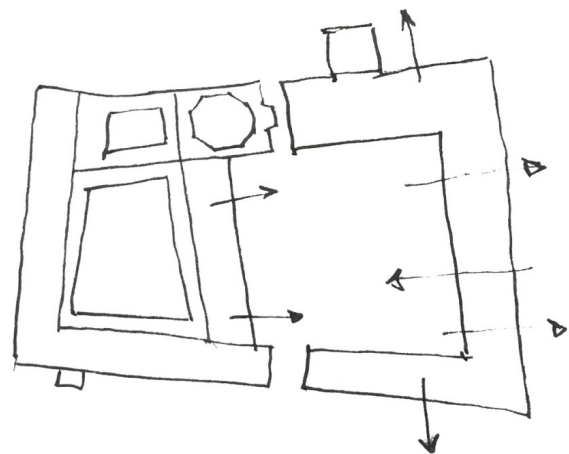
For me, the extension of the abbey has to be an 'ally' of the existing building. Also, in relation to the proposed program, seems so important to bring the experience of living and 'making' into one place – a complex or 'unity' [figure 2]. It is a 'connection' that is important which refers to the close interaction between the extension and existing abbey. However, the abbey itself is a very introverted building which hardly reacts to the nature, forest or its surroundings. For this reason, my intention is to design an extension which could bring the abbey closer to nature and still keep its spiritual value [figure 3].

It also relates to my fascination and research on the arrangements and principles of the medieval monasteries and convents which, according to Mark Pimlott:

*Although isolated from the world, contained elaborated internal networks.<sup>2</sup>*



**Figure 2.** A 'unity'.



**Figure 3.** Open to the forest.

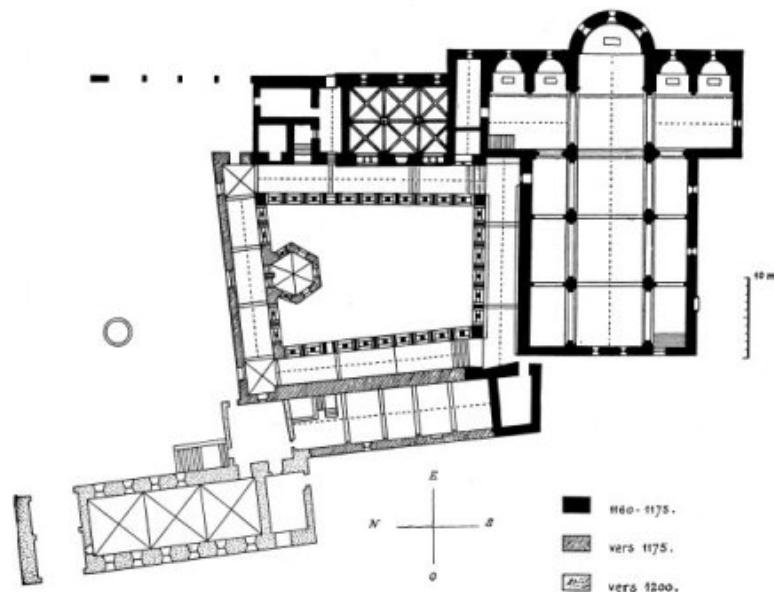
---

2 Pimlott 2016: 250.



These 'networks' were the worlds in itself, continuous and unpredictable. There a plenty of examples on how these designs were implemented but I would like to overview several of them to support my idea. One these models is the famous Cistercian abbey of *Le Thoronet* (c1200) in Provence. It is an extensive complex of buildings with cloister as the main element of the composition [figure 4]. As Pimlott asserted:

*The cloister was at once a passage, a route between various parts of the complex, and a place for thought, infinite in its continuous unfolding.*<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 4.** Plan of the Le Thoronet abbey.

Source: <https://archidialog.com/tag/la-tourette/page/2/>

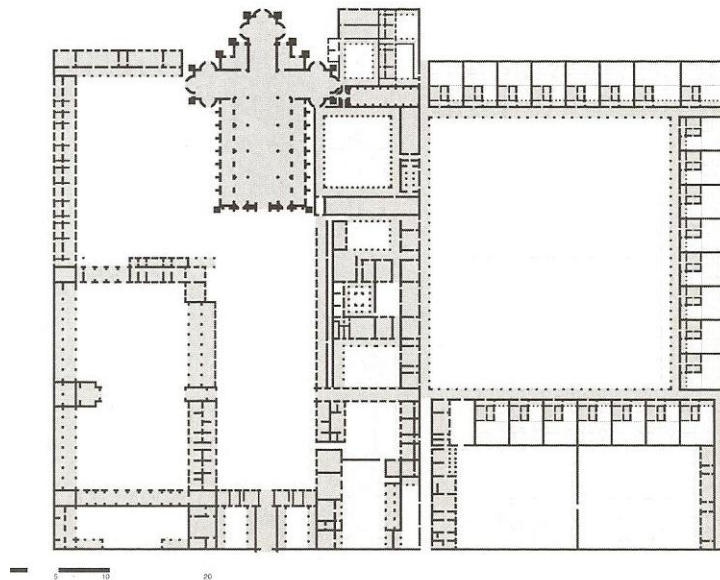
As a matter of fact, cloisters and courtyards were the meeting places and the main life of the monastery.

Another beautiful example is *Certosa di Pavia*, 14<sup>th</sup> century monastery in provence of Pavia in Italy, which was also designed as a network of courtyards and spaces [figure 5]. All those courtyards not only differ in size but they all have different spatial qualities and functions.

The later reinterpreted version (of the Le Thoronet) was the monastery of La Corbusier Sainte-Marie de la Tourette, near Lyon (1959) [figure 6], *inferring the whole in each of these spatial episodes*.<sup>4</sup>

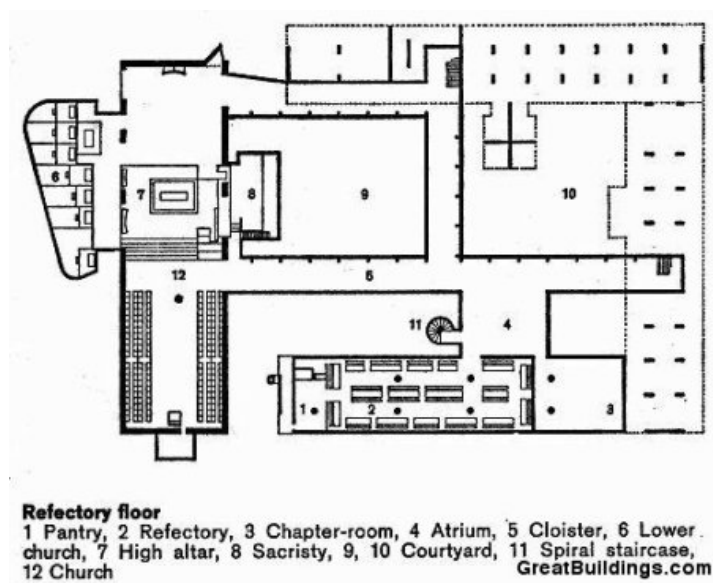
<sup>3</sup> Pimlott 2016: 250.

<sup>4</sup> Pimlott 2016: 250.



**Figure 5.** Plan of the Certosa di Pavia.

Source: <https://juliafoggterrain.wordpress.com/2013/03/17/landscapes-without-horizons/>



**Figure 6.** Plan of the la Tourette.

Source: <https://juliafoggterrain.wordpress.com/2013/03/17/landscapes-without-horizons/>

In a matter of fact, the last notion was also the fundamental theme of van der Laan and his *dynamic superimposition* of models. Separate elements relate to the whole: *from the smallest building part to the terrain, everything is interrelated*. He introduced three scales of the building: domain (building plans), court (interior spaces) and cell (wall compositions). For this reason, creating a 'complex' where one part relates to the other and to the 'whole' (the existing abbey to the extension and extension to the nature) is a theme I intend to follow and elaborate. In addition, with all these examples I wanted to bring closer the understanding on how such complex could be implemented and designed.

### Conclusion

To design an extension to this building definitely is a challenge as here comes not only the question of how to treat an existing building but more about how to find the 'right language between old and new and still keep the spirit of the place. Not only because Abbey Roosenberg has its own physical limitations which do require specific approach on defining the exact use of both facilities. Also, experience of van der Laan's architecture wants to be preserved and treated with accuracy and sensibility. Personally, I do not think there is a right or wrong answer but more an individual approach and view on this distinctive architecture.

To conclude, I would like to quote Richard Padovan who expressed his opinion on the future of van der Laan's works which, I believe, is a great standpoint towards design process.

*The greatness of his achievement makes one fear to lose everything by disturbing it, as though by removing one stone from the edifice one risks bringing down the whole structure. But I think we must take that risk, because it is at least equally dangerous, as I said, to cling limpet-like to the rock of his doctrine, not daring to move in any direction. A theory that has ceased to evolve is a dead theory, just as a tree that no longer sheds its leaves and puts out new ones is a dead tree.*<sup>5</sup>

### References:

Padovan, Richard

2008 "Proportion and space", *discussion paper for Werkgroep Vrienden*, pp. 1-22.

Pimlott, Mark

2016 *The public interior as idea and project*. Heijningen: Jap Sam Books.

### Internet sources:

<http://nieuws.kuleuven.be/node/17443>

<https://www.kuleuven.be/studentenvoorzieningen>

---

5 Padovan 2008: 22.

## **A congress centre and a retreat in the Berne Abbey**

Jekaterina Balysuk  
Msc3 studio Roosenberg, Spring 2017  
Irene Cieraad Research Seminar AR3AI 055  
18-05-2017

Table of contents:

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Introduction .....   | 1 |
| 1. A retreat place: Berne Abbey:                                       |   |
| 1.1. Changes through history .....                                     | 2 |
| 1.2. Monastery complex: existing buildings and the new extension ..... | 3 |
| 1.3. Users and retreat programs .....                                  | 8 |
| 1.4. Research results .....  | 9 |
| Conclusions .....  | 9 |

## Introduction

### Interest and the chosen precedent

Abbey Roosenberg is in a remote location in Waasmunster, surrounded by beautiful forest and detached from the noises and busyness of the city. As the main purpose of most rural monasteries was to be isolated and segregated from the 'outside' world, many such type convential buildings of today are transformed into spiritual centres and places for retreat. As I have already mentioned in my previous report, the Abbey Roosenberg is going to be transformed into a study centre, which definitely could become a perfect place for retreat and contemplation for the academics of KU Leuven.

Taking this into account, I was curious to see how this type of transformation (from monastery to retreat) actually works and chose to examine a real-life example, a functioning monastery-retreat centre, where such practices are available. Together with my colleague Bram van Grinsven (as we both were interested in a similar topic) we examined several locations and dutch *Abdij van Berne in Heeswijk* (eng. Berne Abbey) seemed to be a place worth the attention.

Berne Abbey is a functioning 12<sup>th</sup> century monastery of Norbertines and is one of the oldest extant religious communities in the Netherlands. It is situated in North Brabant, in a small town Heeswijk-Dinther (fairly remote location). This abbey still hosts 20 monks and has a recent extension (new living quarters for monks). Additionally, it not only is a current retreat centre, this abbey also offers congress facilities for external parties (groups and individuals). Therefore, a combination of both, retreat and congress centre, seemed an interesting aspect that could complement the new program of the Abbey in Waasmunster.

### Methods and structure of the research

Together with Bram we had a chance to visit the abbey and interview Fons Boom, a Norbertine monk and pastor who has been living in the abbey since 1989. For this reason, a lot of information of this research is based on his own memories and experiences.

My report is divided into three chapters which every one of them discloses the main facts and aspects of the Abbey. I start with the historical review of the three important periods in the history of Abbey: its foundation, the period from middle ages till the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and from 19<sup>th</sup> century till nowadays. Through such an extent period of time not only the appearance of the abbey changed, but also its emphasis and purpose. Later, I focus on the spaces that Abbey acquires. As we get a chance to see the monastery complex in its current situation, the research is accompanied with the pictures taken on the location itself. Lastly, I overview the function of the abbey, describing its users and programs available.

## 1. A retreat place: Berne Abbey

### 1.1. Changes through history

The foundation<sup>1</sup> of the Abbey can be dated back to 1134. It was established by the knight and nobleman Fulcold of Berne, lord of Teisterband, in the Dutch town of Berne, on the banks of the river Maas. He converted his castle into the monastery, where he himself became a lay brother. Fulcold initially brought Augustinian canons from Rolduc Abbey<sup>2</sup> to start the monastery, but was dissatisfied with their lack of discipline, and sent them back again. With the second attempt he invited the newly established *Premontre* order<sup>3</sup>, also known as Norbertines which, fortunately, remained and further flourished.

From middle ages till the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century abbey prevailed the strict monastic rules and was always held in a high esteem. It possessed the right of patronage over nine parishes, which were always served by priests from the abbey. However, after a century of existence, the monastery changed its direction. The strict monastic period ended and the focus shifted from works in the monastery to the ones outside the abbey. Not only the secular authority changed, but also the spiritual sovereignty spread, making it a spiritual and secular centre in this region of the Netherlands.

In 1572, during the *Eighty Years War*, the abbey was plundered by the Geuzen and in 1579 it was burned down. After the siege of 's-Hertogenbosch in 1629 the canons of the former abbey sought shelter in the various parishes and in the safer southern part of the Netherlands. The religious were not discouraged, and the abbot obtained a house at Vilvoorde, near Brussels, from which he directed the spiritual and temporal interests of his scattered community. Though dispersed, the canons met frequently at Heeswijk or in some presbytery, and at the death of the abbot they always elected another, so that from the foundation of the abbey in 1134, there is an unbroken succession of abbots.

Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>4</sup> King William I confirmed the continued existence of the abbey and in 1857 the abbey was finally located in Heeswijk (also a new church was built and enlarged in 1927). The community grew in numbers and till the World War II, the Norbertines mainly focused on education as their way to contribute to society. In 1886 the abbot opened a college which staff consisted entirely of priests from the abbey. The seminary was initially incorporated into the main abbey building. Around 1900 more than two class rooms were needed, consequently, a larger education facility was built attached to the main building (Gymnasium St. Norbert). Around 1920 the abbey began production of their liturgical publications in their own printing office (to express particular religious ideas). Next to the abbey there is still a printing office, a bookshop and a publishing group for Liturgy.

The seminary kept on growing steadily, making larger additions necessary. In 1930 this resulted in the construction of *Gymnasium van Berne*, a separate building, just outside the canals of the abbey. This Gymnasium is still functional today (now called *Gymnasium Bernrode*). Since the 1990 the abbey's principal is no longer the headmaster of the school's council. As a consequence, the school is completely independent of the abbey today.

---

1 Further information is based on the facts found at <https://en.wikipedia.org>.

2 Rolduc Abbey is a medieval abbey in Kerkrade, the Netherlands.

3 The Order of Canons Regular of Prémontré, also known as the Premonstratensians, the Norbertines are a Roman catholic religious order founded in Premontre in 1120 by St. Norbert. Premonstratensians are designated by *O.Praem. (Ordo Praemonstratensis)* following their name.

4 The history of the Abbey dating 19<sup>th</sup> century and its current situation is based on the information from the interview and talk with the monk Fons Boom together with the facts found at <https://en.wikipedia.org>.

When the gymnasium left the *Abdijhuis* (eng. Abbey house) around 1930, the building was first used as living space for monks. Since the 1980's however, the building started to be used for other functions. Firstly, it became a music course centre, where teachers of the catholic schools of Brabant would stay for a couple of days to follow music lessons. From 1989, the abbey has become a *Vormingscentrum* (eng. training center) organising different retreat-like courses. These theme-based religious retreats (for example, a theme could be 'sharing life') became very popular. Mainly the army used the abbey for this sort of short stay retreats, later also school boards and groups of teachers from different catholic schools in the region, as well as religious groups. In 1999 the new extension to the Abbey was build (designed by dutch architecture firm *Oomen*). Its function still serves as living quarters for monks with all modern facilities.

The *Vormingscentrum* lost its popularity and went bankrupt in 2005. The abbey continued hosting courses however, but the new way of these retreats were no more interwoven with the monastic daily life. Since 2005 the *Abdijhuis* is rented out as a sort of congress centre with rooms mostly for the short stay.

### 1.2. Monastery complex: existing buildings and the new extension

Abbey distinctly changed and grew through the period of time and now can be seen as a whole monastery complex consisting of several parts (buildings) that are (inter)connected with each other [figure 1 and 2]<sup>5</sup>:

- *Abdijhuis* – the main existing Abbey building (currently – the congress centre);
- church;
- the part rented for gymnasium;
- refugee centre (not directly connected to the building and there is no relation between monks and refugees);
- the extension – living quarters for the monks.



**Figure 1.** Bird-view: 1 – the Abdijhuis; 2 – church; 3 – a part rented

<sup>5</sup> Most of the pictures are taken by the author, otherwise is stated.



for gymnasium; 4 – recent extension; 5 – refugee centre.



**Figure 2.** The view of the Abbey.

The former *Abdijhuis* of the complex was renovated through time but remains its old-fashioned character (preserved furniture in common rooms and paintings in the hallways, also see figure 3 and 4).



**Figure 3.** Main hallway.



**Figure 4.** Hallway to the short stay rooms.

There are 15 short stay rooms (private spaces to host visitors), as well as, common meeting/conference [figure 5], dining [figure 6], meditation/yoga [figure 7] and concentration rooms [figure 8].



**Figure 5.** Conference room.



**Figure 6.** Dining space.



**Figure 7.** 'Yoga' room.



**Figure 8.** The silence space.



Private spaces are for individuals or for couples. These rooms are renewed to meet current needs (new showers and toilets installed) but remain austere and simplistic (figure 9). Common spaces are used for group meetings or collective leisure time (figure 10 and 11). In a matter of fact, retreat courses (more extensively explained in the following chapter) require to have common meetings (some of them including the monks), therefore, these spaces are used frequently.



**Figure 9.** Individual short stay room.



**Figure 10.** Collective space.



**Figure 11.** Collective space.

The new extension of the building is straightly connected to the existing part (figure 12). This part of the complex is accessible only for monks, with the exception when the abbey is fully booked and the monk rooms are rented out.



**Figure 12.** 'Unity': transition from one building to the other emphasized through the different pattern of floor tiles.



**Figure 13.** Cloister.

The architecture of the extension follows the tradition of monastic building type – cloister – with the courtyard in the middle (figure 13 and 14). There are two floors divided by function: ground floor – common spaces, and first floor – accommodation. Unfortunately, we could not access the ground floor but as we were told that it mainly consists of different leisure and meeting rooms. As I have already mentioned, these spaces are accessible only for monks but the garden is available for visitors.





**Figure 14.** View to the courtyard.

The first floor of the building entirely consists of living spaces. There are several types of private accommodation: rooms that combine living with the bedroom space (figure 15) and the ones that have a separate bedroom (figure 16). All of these rooms are connected by the 'cloister', which has a view to the garden.



**Figure 15.** Occupied living space.



**Figure 16.** Unoccupied living space (suitable for visitors).

### 1.3. Users and retreat programs

There are 2 sorts of visitors: visitors who come in groups (mainly participants of the workshops etc) and individual visitors, who really come for a moment of retreat (mostly retired people). Both types of visitors have an own living room, but can use all the abbey's facilities (meditation room, gardens, communal living room etc).

The *Vormingscentrum* is mainly used for training weekends of schools and nursery institutions, but also for yoga and meditation weekends. The participants of these courses stay in the main building of the abbey and are expected to participate with the monastic routines such as the meals and the morning and evening messes. One monk functions as the 'guest monk' and takes care of the guests, the other monks don't have any contact with the visitors (mainly due age, half of the monks are 80+). In a matter of fact, these training weekends are so popular that they are booked till the end of this year!

Since a few years, the abbey has been giving its own retreat courses, which are workshops based on a spiritual theme, given by a monk. These workshops take 3 to 5 days, where the participants work on their personal reflection and personal development. Often there are two communal meetings, one in the morning and one in the evening. In between these meetings participants work and

reflect alone on their tasks. Unfortunately, these courses are getting less popular though, so the main focus is still on the courses given by external parties.

The abbey is always looking for new ways to stay in use as a spiritual/retreat centre and hopes the unique qualities of the place will remain a place for contemplation, whether it's related to religion or not.

#### 1.4. Research results

I would like to list several observations from the visit and research of this specific precedent:

- Abbey hosts more than one function: it is a residence for monks, a congress center, partly rented to gymnasium, refugee center and next to the Abbey there still remains a printing office and a bookshop.
- The function of the monastery changed radically though time but intention to keep the spirit of monastic life remains. However, it seems to be more idealistic than real: despite the fact that monks still reside in the Abbey and the new offered courses try to incorporate the monastic traditions into the daily routine of visitors, the true spirit of the monastery fades away (seems to work more as a hotel with the congress facilities).
- There is a literal connection to the new extension which seems to have a very straightforward concept of 'unity' between old and new.
- The extension follows the tradition of monastic buildings – cloister – with a beautiful garden that could be used for visitors as well.
- The mixture of visitors and monks in the same new building does not seem to fit its purpose (in a matter of fact ground floor spaces in the extension can be used only by monks).
- Berne Abbey keeps open to what it can become in the future.

#### Conclusions

Berne Abbey is a place that distinctly changed through the extent period of time, not only its appearance (as it grew and enlarged) but also its focus and function. However, it managed to keep its religious community, together opening its doors to the broader perspectives. Especially the success of the rented spaces for the congress facilities, which not only 'fuels' the monastery (as a practical solution), but it also gives a new character and keeps up with the demands of today. I also was pleased with the fact, that monastery is open to the suggestions on what it can become in the future (maybe a study centre as Abbey Roosenberg?).

However, Berne Abbey is a better example of what programs it can assist rather than its architectural implementations (doubts about the use of the extension). Nevertheless, I am definitely convinced that such congress centre for the external parties (or in the case of Roosenberg for the academic professionals) adds quality and has many positive aspects.

Internet sources:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berne\\_Abbey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berne_Abbey) (9-4-2017)

[https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdij\\_van\\_Berne](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdij_van_Berne) (9-4-2017)

<http://www.abdijvanberne.nl/> (1-4-2017)

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Premonstratensians> (16-05-2017)