

Living Stones

Adaptive Reuse and Social Regeneration of Abandoned Monastic Complexes in Italy

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Abstract

Across Italy, a growing number of ecclesiastical buildings—namely monasteries and convents—are falling into disuse due to progressive secularisation. Although this phenomenon is increasing, it is still under-researched in Italy, unlike in other countries where reuse practices are more advanced. This heritage is unique because it combines material and immaterial values. Its physical, morphological, and typological features reflect a collective life full of cultural and symbolic meanings, which are now at risk of disappearing. This situation is both a challenge and an opportunity for contemporary architectural practice, especially given the current imperatives on sustainability, land use, and social equity. The research presented, conducted at the Politecnico di Milano, explores the adaptive reuse of abandoned “religious houses” with a specific focus on socially oriented regeneration. Through bibliographic investigation and case analysis, the study reflects on which functions may be most appropriate to re-inhabit these spaces - favouring inclusive uses that respond to widespread conditions of fragility and privileging the preservation of the memory of their residential and community-based functions. A disused convent in Rimini was selected as a case study. The research combines analytical, participatory, and meta-design phases. Given the absence of complete existing documentation, the methodological approach integrated direct building surveys, cartographic analysis, and historical reconstruction, together with dialogues involving local actors and potential users. This multi-scalar method led to the elaboration of design preconfigurations that interpret the site’s spatial potential in response to current social and environmental needs. Ultimately, the research highlights the relevance of an approach to underused sacred heritage and “religious houses” that seeks to unlock its latent potential through thoughtful revitalisation, grounded in a renewed relationship between care, memory, and contemporary use.

Keywords: Ecclesiastical Heritage, Religious Houses, Social Regeneration

Introduction

In Italy, the issue of disused or underused heritage has become a complex matter involving territories, institutions, and communities. The progressive obsolescence of schools, seaside colonies, hospitals, monasteries, and other structures – often aggravated by lack

of maintenance and fragmented ownership—has produced visible impacts on both urban and rural landscapes, as well as on the collective perception of places (Fondazione Fitzcarraldo 2019, 15). This condition has prompted scholars and practitioners to question how to recover visibility for such concealed and forgotten heritage. Significant experiences, for example, can be identified in the project *InLoco: Museum of Abandonment* or in the *Ascesi Lasciti* project, which have sought to collect explorations and narratives of hidden, submerged, and unknown built heritage. From this perspective, the debate on reuse should not focus only on technical renovation. It requires us to rethink what is valuable: what should be preserved, transformed, or reactivated, and based on which criteria? Building on these questions, the research turns to decommissioned religious assets, a significant and widespread - yet problematic - part of Italy's built heritage, marked by complex regulatory, geographical, political, and managerial challenges.

Ecclesiastical Heritage: the Current Transition

As highlighted in the conference *Doesn't God dwell here anymore?*²⁴, the modern condition of advanced secularisation—combined with a growing awareness of the historical, artistic, and symbolic value of sacred buildings—has brought the issue of church decommissioning to the attention of the Church institution, and beyond (Capanni 2019, 258). In many respects, this consideration can be extended to other ecclesiastical properties. Declining religious practice in large Western urban centres, the rising average age of clergy, and the very limited number of new ordinations have similarly led to the unification of religious houses and parishes, followed by the underuse or abandonment of properties that hold significant religious, cultural, artistic, and historical value (Bartolomei, Capanni 2025, 18–19). In the Italian context, this phenomenon has developed with a temporal delay compared to other countries, where secularisation has occurred more rapidly. For this reason, the management of abandoned religious assets elsewhere in Europe serves as a valuable point of comparison. The planning practices of the Netherlands, Belgium, and Sweden are particularly advanced, and they are distinguished by the active involvement of civil institutions and by the presence of dedicated professional bodies capable of conducting thorough surveys and long-term programming (Contarin 2023). Experts engaged in the valorisation of ecclesiastical heritage in Italy—whether to propose methodological frameworks or to encourage critical reflection—recognize a substantial management difficulty confronting all efforts to restore, conserve, or repurpose religious properties (Bocasso et al. 2024; Asselle, De Lucia 2019). A primary challenge lies in their recurrent classification as *ecclesiastical cultural heritage*, which entails specific legal constraints and complexities in transformation processes. Moreover, the lack of a unified digital database at either the regional or provincial level has a strong impact on their knowledge and management (Longhi 2023). This problem is particularly evident when it comes to finding up-to-date information on the current condition and use of such assets, which is substantially absent in the current open-access catalogues and databases in Italy. A further limitation is constituted by the exclusion of properties belonging to ecclesiastical bodies that are not subject to episcopal authority from the main existing databases, such as religious houses, complexes, abbeys, and monasteries. This situation results in the absence of a systematic vision of the interrelations among properties, making the regeneration of increasingly widespread abandoned sites even more difficult and approximate. Concerning a specific area of Italy, the research conducted in Emilia-Romagna, despite the region's

extensive territorial databases, revealed a lack of up-to-date information on religious properties, their condition, and use.

The Heritage of Communities of Consecrated Life: Identity and Distinctiveness

The “religious houses” examined in this study are defined as properties belonging to *Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*, forming an extremely heterogeneous category for which no standard typologies exist². Understanding their characteristics and identity requires attention to the long history of communities committed to living evangelical values in a radical way. Different religious orders have demonstrated the ability to adapt to changing times, to face crises, and to remain points of reference for cities and populations, revealing their crucial role in shaping contemporary territories (Schutz 2004). Convents and monasteries have always functioned not only as spaces of prayer and reflection, but also as centres of culture, technical progress, and humanity (De Rubeis, Marazzi 2008). Moreover, together with the social fabric, the territory itself was shaped by the communities’ presence and work, such as land reclamation, in its landscape and road network. A peculiarity of these built complexes lies in the delicate balance between communal life, hospitality, and dialogue on one side, and privacy, isolation, and silence on the other (Bergo et al. 2015). No activity housed within the space of a monastery or convent is conceived without a specific meaning and value. Spatially, this aspect is translated into a series of thresholds, circulation routes, and sequences that determine both the character and the function of the building. The cloister, when present, serves as a primary mediator between individual and collective dimensions (Coomans 2018), giving the complex a specific character of introversion. Even without a typical cloistered layout, recurring functional and distributive patterns can be observed. The religious life enacted within these buildings produces a spatiality directly shaped by immaterial aspects such as rules, tradition, contemplative vocation, and communal sharing (Bartolomei 2018). Effective valorisation must consider these features in order to enhance heritage whilst also addressing the evolving needs of communities through new tools and processes.

New Social Use for Religious Houses

Historically, following the suppression of religious communities in the late eighteenth century and the subsequent massive secularisation of their properties, many assets of religious institutes became part of the emerging state system of public buildings, acquiring functions as hospitals, barracks, prisons, schools, and universities (Consorti 2010). This historical fact confirms their adaptability and suitability for public use, where the community and personal dimensions are in constant interaction. In recent decades, the issue of the contemporary reuse of disused religious buildings has sparked intense debate, prompting reflection on the significance of historical and cultural heritage for both the faithful and the wider community. The increasing secularisation and the gradual abandonment of the buildings and complexes by the communities of consecrated life cause a profound rupture in the history of the assets and their contexts, demanding careful understanding. In approaching the valorisation of ecclesiastical heritage, some reference points can be found in the form of regulations, guidelines, and recommendations issued by religious and civil authorities.³ In particular, ecclesiastical authorities aim to preserve the intrinsic religious value of these assets, keeping them alive and expressive of their authentic meaning, and continuing to



Fig. 1. Former monastery of Astino, Bergamo (Martina Pagliarani, 2024)

respond to societal needs (Pontificium Consilium de Cultura 2018; Capanni 2019). Scientific literature and studies on heritage and reuse highlight a conception of value beyond cultic or religious significance, emphasising the cultural and social value that has developed over time (Luisi 2021, 81–82). They demonstrate that, while material restoration is necessary, it is not sufficient for genuine regeneration; meaningful outcomes depend on community involvement from the outset. The social valorisation of uninhabited properties is based on such a vision, as opposed to projects driven primarily by economic profit (Giani, Giofrè 2019). When adaptive reuse is conceived merely as a physical adaptation to new functions, it risks reducing buildings to “empty shells,” disconnected from local communities (Della Torre 2022). Focusing on social goals, however, adaptive reuse can create intangible value, especially in projects that combine several functions and involve many stakeholders. This approach forms part of Della Torre’s concept of “coevolution” (2022): society and heritage exert reciprocal influence as social needs evolve. A careful analysis of historical values—both material and immaterial traces left by history—is essential, as they constitute the genetic and transformative logic of the heritage itself. Only a renewed connection between care and use can activate circular and sustainable resources. With the aim of framing the current state of this phenomenon in Italy and of analysing some ongoing processes, four monastic and conventual complexes were selected as exemplary case studies where socially oriented reuse preserved both their identity and original structure, while maintaining the vocation for collective use. The former monastery of Astino (BG) that has been documented is among them (Fig. 1). In addition, a concise sample of similar complexes in Italy, no longer inhabited by religious communities, was compiled. Four examples were selected for each of the following orders: Friars Minor, Capuchin Franciscans, Dominicans, and Benedictines. The cases were chosen from different geographical contexts, based on data availability and prior knowledge, and collected in a matrix that allows a comparative reading of the key data and information. This frame provides an overview, albeit limited, of the possible conditions of numerous other cases that could not be exhaustively surveyed, highlighting both the complexity and variety of circumstances, and underscoring the broader issue of abandonment, which warrants a comprehensive approach (tab. below).

Name	Location	Province	Type	Area	Religious order	Construction	Reconstruction	Abandonment	Reason	Posthumous use	Conditions	Actual use	Transfer
Santa Sofia	Salerno	SA	monastery	1.500 mq	Benedictines	XI century	2018	1807	Napoleonic Suppression	court, School	good	co-working space	sold to privates
San Benedetto	Milano	MI	monastery	3.800 mq	Benedictines	1802	1950	2025	relocation due to decrease in members	rest house, student house, offices	good	offices (partially)	sold to privates
San Francesco	Cuneo	CU	convent	3.600 mq	Friars Minor	XIII century	1980	1810	Napoleonic Suppression	barracks	excellent	civic museum	sold to the municipality
San Francesco	Lucca	LU	convent	6.000 mq	Friars Minor	1228	2013	2003	Suppression decrease in members	barracks, assistential spaces	excellent	University Campus	sold
Sant'Annunziata	Sestri Levante	GE	convent	1.700 mq	Dominicans	1496	1995	1867	Suppression of religious orders	sea colony	good	multifunctional spaces for conferences and events	sold to Municipality
Sant'Agnese	Bologna	BO	convent	6.000 mq	Dominican nuns	1253	2007	1799	Napoleonic Suppression	papal barracks, hospital	poor	Army Documentation Centre	sold to the municipality

A Research Experience: The Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Rimini

After having traced a historical and contemporary framework of the topic, the research experience focused on a specific case that has recently undergone a process of abandonment. Located in the municipality of Rimini, the *Santa Maria delle Grazie* historical complex, which played a central role in the city's cultural and spiritual life, is currently partially underused following the departure of the Franciscan friars who resided there until 2023. The complex is composed of an active sanctuary, the abandoned convent, an old seminary—now functioning as a retirement home—and an independent “villa” building, currently housing a municipal museum awaiting to be relocated. The research methodology adopted provides a first contribution toward guiding similar cases of disuse, and it was structured in three parallel, non-sequential phases: I. Analytical, II. Participatory and strategic, III. Programmatic and meta-design.

I. Analytical Phase: focused on understanding the characteristics of the context in which the property is located. Firstly, analysis at the territorial scale, including review of strategic plans and calls for proposals, allowed the formulation of an overview of planned actions and other urgent needs identified in the city of Rimini. Mapping ecclesiastical properties (including churches, religious buildings, and monasteries) in the municipality enabled situating the case within a broader system and considering interrelations between religious sites. In the absence of a formal census of such properties, available data were cross-referenced and current conditions assessed to create a picture as updated as possible regarding the quantity, state, and use of this heritage. Simultaneously, a historical reconstruction of the Santa Maria delle Grazie complex and its transformations over time was developed, deepening knowledge of its specific geographic and social context. Attention was given to the property's material and immaterial traces, documenting its current configuration, material composition, and use.

II. Participatory and Strategic Phase: aimed at gathering needs and expectations through a participatory method to construct a requirements framework and define strategic intervention lines. A survey was distributed to the local community (reaching about 300 responses), and individual interviews were conducted with various stakeholders, revealing widespread awareness of the site's potential and a strong desire to enhance it. Across all age groups, participants expressed a need for sharing, gathering, and social interaction spaces. Based on these insights, the main action strategy was defined, leading to a functional programme aligned with the expressed needs, as well as an overall approach to the valorisation of the site.

III- Programmatic and meta-design Phase: developed a functional programme for the abandoned areas of the complex and a phased action plan establishing priorities for interventions. The aim was to foster economic and managerial support during the regeneration process and to minimize associated risks. A key aspect of the functional reallocation process entails the integration of the religious function with that of residential space, thereby establishing a new community tasked with the maintenance of the site, in concert with public functions in independent, open-to-the-city spaces. Finally, architectural prefigurations were carried out for key elements of the proposal, including the interior spaces of underused buildings, preserving their current configuration, and the open space, with particular interest for the paved areas surrounding the buildings, which currently serve as the main entrance area for the entire complex.

Le Grazie: a Proposal for a Living Heritage

During the participatory phase of the project, the faithful community, who were still strongly attached to the sanctuary, emphasised the wish for a space dedicated to hospitality. Starting from these hints, the programme has devised a functional combination of residential, cultural and community functions. The project involves the revitalisation of the former convent's underutilised areas into a residential educational community. This will be achieved through the addition of new public spaces within the “villa”, including a bar, rooms that can be booked for use by groups and associations, and versatile exhibition spaces. Both the sanctuary and the retirement home will be preserved for their actual function and a series of adjacent, currently disused spaces, will be enhanced and repurposed for ancillary functions such as shared spaces for believers' activities and events. The open spaces will be revitalised through the redesign of the churchyard and the access points. The surrounding green spaces belonging to the complex will be redeveloped through the resumption of cultivation and the addition of areas for outdoor activities. The churchyard has been identified as a central element of the project, resolving access to the various parts of the complex and serving as the heart for reactivating the site, thereby demonstrating the contemporary character of the intervention through the use of materials and colours. Of particular interest, overall, is the reintroduction of a dwelling function, which is essential to reactivate a circular system of use, maintenance, and development of the site's potential, otherwise omitted, enabling a virtuous exchange between new residents and occasional users (Fig. 2).

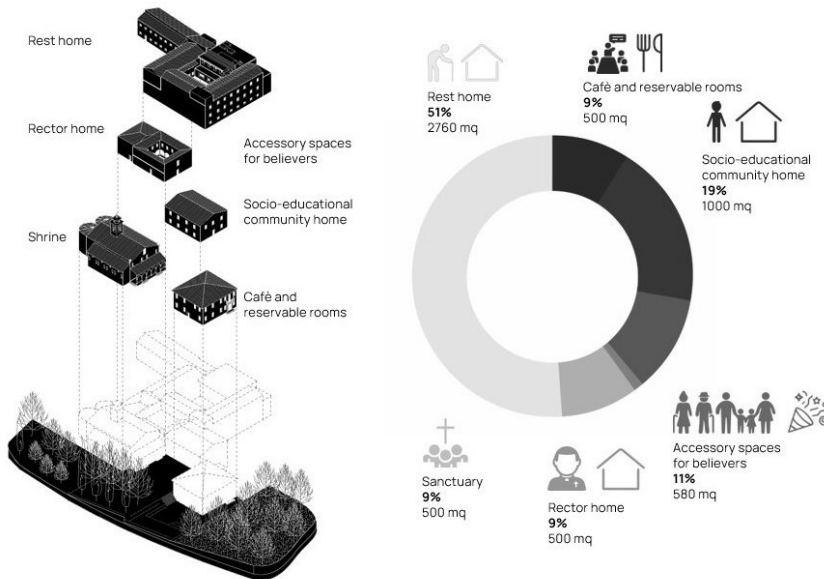


Fig. 2. Functional schemes of the proposed reuse of the complex of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Rimini (composed by the authors)

Conclusions

The vacant ecclesiastical heritage in Italy, as a witness to an invaluable cultural legacy, constitutes a vast reservoir of resources to be reactivated to foster territorial and social regeneration. The process of reuse and regeneration requires, in essence, a comprehensive understanding of the broader system in which such assets are embedded, in their dual material and immaterial dimensions. The research conducted on the convent of *Santa Maria delle Grazie* in Rimini is framed within a wider rethinking of monastic and conventual complexes across the Italian peninsula, which share analogous histories and characteristics. It aims to provide methodological and design insights to address this challenge. Among other findings, the study highlighted the need to expand surveys and databases capable of initiating a systemic reflection on their current state, conditions of use or disuse (today not uniformly documented), to intersect heritage valorisation with the needs of cities and territories. Moreover, the participatory approach confirmed that the reuse of a religious complex extends far beyond the realms of architectural recovery. Indeed, it becomes a collective social action, capable of reactivating bonds and values across an entire territory. Direct engagement with the convent typology and the drafting of a renewed functional programme demonstrated the importance of enhancing the distributive, typological, and locational characteristics of these assets, starting from their primary housing vocation. The programming of interventions through sequential phases is also of crucial importance, since these facilitate the initiation of the process while ensuring its long-term sustainability. Notably, the introduction of new socially and community-oriented residential functions, together with a set of public and hybrid functions that enable the opening of the complex to citizens and ensure its economic and managerial viability, reflects approaches increasingly discussed in international contexts, responding to contemporary societal needs for spaces of socialisation and sharing – particularly for associations with social and cultural purposes. This line of reuse, therefore, seeks to preserve the identity of the place, ensuring that the project does not interrupt but rather reinforces the values revealed in the knowledge-building process, while allowing architecture to continue playing the crucial role that it has historically played.

Notes

1. The conference was held in Rome in 2018 and was promoted by the Pontifical Council for Culture, the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) and the Pontifical Gregorian University and it is one of the first organic reflection on the topic in Italy.
2. «Religious houses include convents, monasteries, abbeys, priories, coenobia, hermitages, provostries, residences, collegiate churches, canonries, and the dwellings of parishes entrusted to religious people, infirmaries for elderly members, formation houses such as novitiates, probation houses, juniorates, seminaries, scholasticates, and every other place inhabited by consecrated persons.» (Giani 2020).
3. Among the many, reference should be made to: *Codex Iuris Canonici* (the official collection of norms in canon law); Pontificium Councilum de Cultura, *The Decommissioning and Ecclesiastical Reuse of Churches: Guidelines*. Vaticano, 2018; Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Guidelines for the Management of Assets in Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*, Circular Letter 2 (2014); Investment 2.4 of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR).

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