

# Adaptive Reuse Strategies for the Former Convent of San Francesco alle Scale in Ancona

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## Abstract

In the heart of Ancona's historic center, the former convent of San Francesco alle Scale—part of the so-called “*Isola*” of San Francesco—stands as a forgotten yet significant architectural trace. Severely damaged by World War II bombings and the 1971 earthquake, and left in a state of ruin for decades, the complex today represents a latent urban void: a “periphery at the center,” suspended between memory and neglect. This contribution presents an adaptive reuse proposal that aligns with the need to preserve cultural identity in the context of carbon-positive architectural scenarios. Rather than opting for demolition or full reconstruction, the project embraces a low-impact, incremental strategy aimed at regenerating the site through care—understood both as spatial stewardship and as a critical-curatorial approach to the built environment.

The design hypothesis, developed within a thesis design studio, is part of a larger framework agreement signed in 2023 by Università Politecnica delle Marche, the Municipality of Ancona, and the Soprintendenza Marche Nord. It also feeds into a broader urban regeneration agenda involving the Italian State Property Agency (*Agenzia del Demanio*). The project proposes a partial reactivation of the complex by integrating the existing ruins into a new landscape vision: transforming open spaces and ruined courtyards into a public romantic garden and preserving some areas as “inhabited ruins.” Selected historical spaces are reappropriated with new cultural, educational, and civic functions, inserted in a manner that is reversible and respectful of the existing spatial and material conditions.

This approach foregrounds the potential of adaptive reuse not only as a sustainable practice in terms of carbon footprint and material conservation, but also as a means of preserving and reinterpreting collective memory and identity. By recognizing the value of incompleteness, the fragmentary, and the unfinished, the project reclaims the existing fabric as a dynamic infrastructure—one capable of accommodating new uses while narrating its historical layers. Ultimately, the case study offers a reflection on architectural design as an act of care: one that does not erase or overwrite the past, but rather listens, reveals, and repositions it within the urban life of today

Keywords: Ancona, Convent Reuse, Urban Regeneration

## Introduction—San Francesco Convent, a Periphery at the Centre

The research project presented in this paper is part of a series of studies that, for many years, has engaged the design research group of the DICEA Department in identifying

strategies for the reactivation and enhancement of numerous sites in the city of Ancona, home to our University, which represents for our research a valuable object of continuous investigation—an open-air laboratory. In particular, the studies on the former convent of San Francesco stem from a framework agreement signed in 2023 between the Università Politecnica delle Marche, the Municipality of Ancona, and the SABAP Marche, established with the aim of activating research and experimental processes oriented toward the reactivation of the complex and its urban relationships. Developed within a thesis design laboratory, the proposal presented here explores the potential of incremental, partial, and reversible reuse strategies for the area. Moreover, the strategy for its reactivation is part of a broader urban regeneration program that involves the Italian State Property Agency (*Agenzia del Demanio*) and the “Piano Città” initiative.

The context in which San Francesco is set is that of a peculiar historic center, rich in monumental and archaeological landmarks, which, over the past century, has undergone a series of dramatic transformations and destructions, followed by an incomplete reconstruction process. This condition has left the area with various aporias and urban voids, and with many unused and abandoned buildings, contributing to a condition that can be described as a “periphery at the center.”

The San Francesco complex is a large medieval convent, originally organized around two cloisters for a total area of approximately 3,800 square meters. Its church—currently restored and consecrated—is an exquisite example of the craftsmanship that, during the Middle Ages, circulated between Croatia, Venice, and the Italian cities along the Adriatic coast. Also known as the “Island of San Francesco,” the building constitutes an important node within the system of crossings through the city center, forming part of a rich monumental network of civil and religious complexes that developed along the so-called *via Maestra*, a ridge route connecting the lower part of the city to the Cathedral of San Ciriaco. Since the post-war period—thus for about eighty years—the complex has been in a state of abandonment and decay, severely damaged first by the bombings of the Second World



Fig. 1. San Francesco Convent area inside the city center (source: Google Earth)

War and later by the 1971 earthquake. Today, it presents itself as a fragmented architectural palimpsest—at once ruin, threshold, and latent “civic infrastructure.”

### **A History of Continuous Reuse**

The history of the San Francesco complex is an articulated and complex one, analogous to that of many other religious complexes of its kind, which over time have been subjected to multiple transformations and uses. In this specific case, following its original monastic function, during the Napoleonic conquests and later the Risorgimento period, the complex became the headquarters of an Infantry Barracks, with the interior of the church even being “densified” through the insertion of intermediate floors to accommodate regiments. This structural configuration was subsequently maintained for the complex’s next use as a city hospital and psychiatric center, a function it retained until the construction of the first civic hospital of Ancona, the Umberto I, in the 1920s.

During these years, the entire surface of the so-called “Island” was substantially built up, with phenomena of densification and accretive growth, especially in the northern part of the complex. From the early 1930s until the Second World War, once its hospital function had ended, San Francesco was reconverted to host the National Museum of the Marche, which included an important archaeological section within its premises. This was, in fact, the last active phase in the life of the conventual building. During the Allied bombings, given the proximity of the complex to the port areas—strategic military targets—it suffered extensive damage and destruction. No true reconstruction followed: only structural stabilization of wall sections was carried out, while restoration efforts focused on the Church and the Bell Tower.

In the 1950s, amid the ongoing reconstruction process of the historic center, the conventual part of San Francesco remained in ruins; moreover, a portion of it on the downhill side was demolished to make room for the access alley to the Church. At the same time, adjoining the southern edge of the complex, the “Tommaseo” school complex was built, in a markedly modern architectural language and attitude, which, at the points of connection with the former convent, failed to achieve a satisfactory relationship with the pre-existing structure. Decades of neglect followed for the Convent, until the 1990s, when the Municipality of Ancona commissioned architect Massimo Carmassi with a project for the restoration and reconstruction of the convent, intended to house the Municipal Library. As often happens in Italy, however, the project remained on paper; the library was instead installed in a nearby palace, leaving San Francesco in its state of incompleteness, which endures to this day.

### **The Unfinished as a Resource for Urban Regeneration—A Critical Lens**

At present, the complex appears in a state of ruin, entirely enveloped by spontaneous vegetation, with safety works that only precariously ensure the stability of its masonry structures. Yet, precisely this condition of “perpetual ruin” opens the site to new interpretations and sensibilities, to the point that the neighborhood’s inhabitants and local associations, together with the Municipality, have expressed the wish to preserve the area as much as possible as a “romantic garden” in ruins—nonetheless accessible and usable by the community as an urban park.

The approach to reuse adopted in this research stems from these premises, conceiving the unfinished and the ruin not as a deficient condition to be filled, but as a generative

resource for a renewed form of design—one capable of hosting new forms of public life. This approach is based on the assumption that the spatial response to the existing cannot be exhausted in rigid, muscular operations, but rather in incremental and open-ended strategies and processes, susceptible to adjustments—or better, adaptations—over time, and characterized by plural and hybrid functions. These include phasing and temporary uses, and, in this specific case, open possibilities for community appropriation. In this sense, adaptive reuse today constitutes one of the most urgent and strategic fields within contemporary design culture. In a condition marked by scarcity of resources, the climate emergency, and the crisis of the extractive paradigm of construction, the existing built environment is no longer understood merely as a legacy to be preserved, but as an “active deposit” of spatial potentialities. This shift in perspective has reopened the debate on the capacity of existing buildings to activate new forms of dwelling and urban life, moving beyond a purely conservative view of preservation. Such a perspective aligns with a broader disciplinary reflection that conceives the existing built environment as a dynamic palimpsest, in which historical layers do not simply accumulate, but rather interrogate one another through critical acts of rewriting. Reuse thus takes shape as a curatorial and interpretative practice, in which design does not impose a definitive form but instead activates open and progressive processes. The temporality of the project expands, rejecting the rhetoric of the conclusive intervention and instead privileging scenarios capable of evolving over time. To speak of an incremental and adaptive method means to conceive time itself as a design material. The project does not assert itself as a completed form but as an open platform, capable of accompanying future adaptations and reinterpretations without compromising the historical legibility of the site. In this sense, reuse is configured as a temporal as well as spatial infrastructure: not merely a regeneration of the existing, but the activation of co-evolutionary processes between building, city, and community.

### **The Reuse of San Francesco Convent as a Strategy for Urban Reactivation**

It is within this tension between permanence and transformation, between use and expectation, that the former convent of San Francesco is reinterpreted not as a closed

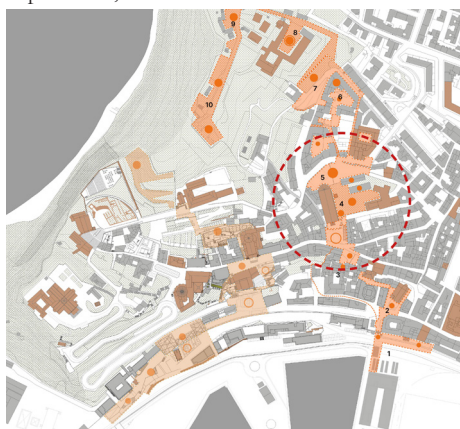


Fig. 2. The strategic urban regenerations axes of Ancona's city center (Francesco Chiacchiera)

object, but as a potential urban platform. The reactivation of San Francesco is part of a broader strategy which, at the urban scale, conceives a network of connections and a continuity of public spaces and passages along the gradient of Colle Guasco, outlining ascending routes toward the prominent landmarks of the upper part of the city. These routes traverse strategic nodes where projects of open spaces and urban regeneration can enable a coherent and comprehensive reactivation of the neighborhood.

The design proposal is articulated through three main operations, conceived not as conclusive interventions but as activating devices capable of re-establishing the spatial, social, and symbolic relationships between the former convent and the city: reopening and connecting, born from a re-reading of the building as a system of constructive and functional bands; the garden as a civic device; and the construction of a civic hub. The methodological framework of the project is based on an incremental and situated approach, which recognizes the value of the existing not as a material to be entirely re-functionalized, but as an infrastructure already endowed with meanings, relational potential, and spatial forms still capable of being reactivated. From this perspective, the project does not aim to produce a definitive solution, but to trigger a phased process in which each partial intervention becomes an opportunity to activate new relationships of use and collective imagination.

### **Reopening and Connecting—The Threshold as Urban Infrastructure**

The first action concerns the restitution of permeability to the complex, which today is perceived as a closed and inaccessible body. Through the controlled opening of passages and the activation of new pedestrian crossing axes, the convent is reinterpreted as an active threshold between the different elevations and textures of the historic city — no longer as a separate enclave but as a relational node. It is precisely from the opening of this ascending passage—connecting the seafront port areas to the top of the Colle del Parco del Cardeto (an operation currently under study by the Municipality as a temporary action with the dual purpose of safety and initial reactivation)—that the reuse operation of San Francesco can draw vitality and trigger the regeneration processes and the decisions necessary for the progressive recovery and valorization of the entire area.

### **The Garden as a Civic Device—The Inhabited Ruin**

The heart of the intervention lies in the transformation, within the “Island” area, of the internal courtyards and open spaces of the complex into a landscape accessible and inhabitable by the community. Far from reconstructing what has been lost, the project valorizes the condition of ruin as both poetic and functional infrastructure, configuring a “romantic urban garden” that reinterprets, in a contemporary key, the romantic sensibility toward the ruin as a sign and a “freezing” of the building’s current state—as well as a memory of its monastic use. The garden is envisioned as a sculpture park and a place of contemplation, offering a privileged view over the city and the port below, and capable of accommodating informal practices of pause, encounter, and micro-events. Here, the landscape is not a backdrop but an active component of the urban project, capable of rendering the unfinished once again inhabitable.

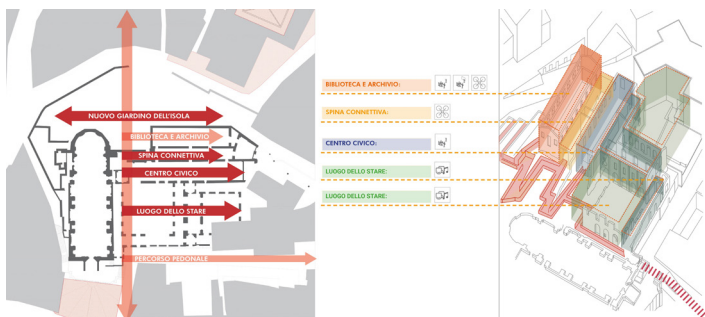


Fig. 3. Design concept (Francesco Chiacchiera, Giulia Lillini)

### The Civic Hub as a Reference Point for the Reactivation of Neighborhood Dynamics and the Provision of Community Services

In the parts of the building still recoverable, the project envisions the targeted insertion of public functions of a cultural, educational, and community nature: flexible and “open” spaces designed to host local associations, provide co-working stations, and accommodate training activities. These functions are directly connected, through an intermediate infrastructural and service space, to the *Sala del Capitolo*—the last of the volumes of the complex, owned by the Superintendency—which is intended to be dedicated to archival spaces, document consultation, and a study center.

The interior spaces are conceived as light and reversible interventions, respecting the material structure of the convent through additions that are structurally independent from the existing fabric and adaptable to the banded organization of the building. The priority is not to saturate the complex with a fixed program, but to allow real use to transform it over time, maintaining margins of indeterminacy and openness. Through the exploration of partial and reversible operations, this research investigates the potential of architecture as an instrument of urban activation, capable of valorizing the unfinished, the fragmentary, and the condition of expectation as resources for reuse-oriented design. The design attitude that guided the research and the metaproject proposal—developed within a thesis design laboratory—stems from a contemporary disposition toward *adaptivity* and *minimal intervention*, both volumetric and economic, given the circumstances under which such actions are carried out. This approach, situated halfway between installation, landscape or “zero-volume” design, and new construction, embraces a “frugal” attitude toward the existing: with minimal and incremental actions, it enables the reactivation and valorization of the built heritage.

### Conclusions

The intervention on the former convent of San Francesco in Ancona is thus configured as a design device capable of reinterpreting the ruin not as a fragility to be healed, but as an active resource for new forms of public space. In an era in which the transformation of the built heritage can no longer be limited to formal conservation nor to speculative replacement, this project proposes a third path: that of reuse as an enabling infrastructure, capable of activating dynamics of collective inhabitation without imposing a definitive



Fig. 4. Design Plan (Francesco Chiacchiera, Giulia Lillini)



Fig. 5. views of the area after the reuse interventions (Francesco Chiacchiera, Giulia Lillini)

outcome. The value of the proposal does not lie in the production of a completed image, but in the activation of an open, progressive, and adaptable process. In this perspective, temporality becomes an integral part of the project, which accepts the unfinished as a fertile condition, maintaining margins of indeterminacy and future possibility. The convent is not returned as a crystallized monument, but as a relational organism once again capable of generating culture, use, and belonging.

This approach suggests a clear disciplinary positioning: adaptive reuse not as a conclusive act of restoration, but as a critical practice capable of interrelating memory and becoming, permanence and transformation. The case of San Francesco thus offers a replicable model for analogous contexts, demonstrating how design can operate not through substitution, but through activation—restoring to the existing built environment its capacity to act once again as a living civic infrastructure.

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