

# A CONCEPT FOR THE REHABILITATION OF THE FORMER CISTERCIAN ABBEY OF HERKENRODE AT KURINGEN, NEAR HASSELT

## JUSTIFICATION

In consequence of the 150th anniversary of Belgian independence, the Belgian National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites has been asked to outline the programme of conservation work in this as yet young kingdom by means of a few examples.

This contribution doesn't refer to the history of conservation of monuments in Belgium but is concerning the actual way of thinking and working on the gradual rehabilitation of an extended site of cultural and historical interest: the former Cistercian convent of Herkenrode at Kuringen, a suburb of Hasselt, a town in the Provincie of Limburg. Considering the present situation with regard to the conservation of monuments in Belgium, this example should be a modest plea for a more dynamic and functional approach, stimulating critical reflection. In other words we don't want to revive the monument as a static witness of a dead past but as a dynamic restoration of a livable structure and form in their living originality.

From this point of view, methods traditionally used for conservation or restoration are considered to be integrated aspects of a more total viable approach. In respect of the research of the historical substance the «lived» originality is to be made transparent in a functional way and this is where society, the principal and the architect equally want to participate in an authentic way. In this context, the study of reanimation is pointing at the contemporary experience of the qualified value (the presence of the past) that is expressed by the monument, the historical site. More over it will become clear what the inhabitants have wanted to express by their permanent occupancy.

For this dynamic, functional approach there are fundamental conditions: the socialization of this «curing» handling, the opening up to the people involved in the genesis of a rehabilitation concept, and the acceptance that also the conservation of monuments has need of formulating and architectural concept in terms of a united mission of society, municipal and architect.

In case not to be restricted too much to the fact of this particular example, I'd like this contribution only to

deal with the concept of rehabilitation, though at the very moment concrete partial projects are being corrected in the final stage.

Nowadays there are, of course, other projects in a lot of fields to which the same way of thinking and working may be applied.

The first part of this report intends to penetrate into the «passed» function and the «presence» of the site as well. The second part tries to make clear how the concept of rehabilitation will make the historical site participate in and bear witness to the new function.

## The presence of the historical site

In the history of the earldom of Loon, Kuringen has played an important part. During the 12th century the counts of Loon who had been living in their fortress at Borgloon, established a more conveniently located stronghold at Kuringen near Hasselt as a place of residence.

Nothing has been preserved of the original riverside fortress on the left bank of the Demer which is separating the arid area of Kempenland from the more fertile land of Hesbaye.

Since 1182 lying downstream, north-west of the central part of Kuringen, the abbey of Herkenrode has always been privileged by the counts of Loon since it has always been their official cemetery.

There on the allodial lands of count Gerard, a brother Henry founded the first convent of Cistercian nuns in the Netherlands in 1217. Owing to the Sacrament of the Miracle it became an important place of pilgrimage in 1317. After a period of decline during the 15th and in the early 16th centuries the abbess Mechtildis of Lechy reinstated community life in strict accordance with the rule of the Order of Citeaux. She was helped by the Prince bishop of Liège, successor to the counts of Loon and patron of the abbey.

This spiritual revival found response in an intensive building campaign followed by a thorough renovation of the abbey buildings.

Only the early Gothic abbey church without side aisles remained as a spiritual source, though altered and extended with a few bays.

For the new prince-episcopal abbey the abbess called in the town architect of Maastricht, a Coenraadt of Nurenbergh. From 1520 to 1538 he built the chapter-house, the dormitory, the cloister, the gateway and the abbess's residence in the late Gothic, early Renaissance style of the Maasland area.

Later on between 1547 and 1550, a brewery was added by Lauwerys Ballen, who had previously built a new refuge for the nuns inside the walls of Hasselt. In the late 16th and early 17th centuries life at the abbey was frequently disturbed by looting, arson and murder. Yet, despite the troubles the abbess Anna van Blocquerie (1585-1620) had to face, she had the living quarters renovated thoroughly. The nuns' cells are notable for their structural resemblance to those of the Carthusian monks.

In 1645 after the treaty of Tienen had put an end to the hostilities in the area, the abbess Anne Catherine of Lamboy proceeded to extend the abbey.

She directed the building of the impressive farmstead, its tithe barn and also the gateway with its lovely dispensary near the Demer (1658) and the separate sacristy behind the church choir (1661).

She and her successors Claude of Merode (1675-1702) and Barbara of Rivière of Aarschot (1728-44) have been responsible for the baroque interior decoration of the church, for which they had called in the Liège sculptors named respectively Artus Quellinus Junior (tombmonument), Jean Delcour (high altar) and Laurent Delbaux (tombmonument).

In spite of a few classicistic alterations (e.g. the central pavilion in the west wing of the farmstead, the gatehouse and the west wing of the abbess's residence) Anna of Croy (1744-1771) decided to exteriorize prosperity and the new way of living in an entirely new building-style. In 1769 Laurent-Benoit Dewez, chief architect at the court of Karel of Lorreinen, governor-general of the Austrian Netherlands, designed an ideal abbatial building for this purpose.

But only the abbess's residence was built.

Her successor Augustina of Hamme (1779-1812), responsible for the interior decoration of the abbess's residence, was pressed to leave the abbey by the French Revolution on 13th December 1796.

Thus after 6 centuries the convent of the Cistercian nuns ceased to exist. On 19th February 1797 the abbey was sold by public auction at Maastricht. A family Claes moved into the 18th century residence which they altered into upper middle-class private mansion in harmony with the landscaped park laid out at the same period.



Fig. Herkenrode Abbey, west side: the farm

The other buildings were abandoned or sacrificed to industrial use (a spinning mill, a gin distillery) as far as they weren't used for agricultural purposes. The consequences were disastrous.

Between 1812 and 1886 the buildings near the Demer, the abbey church with the joining quarters of the convent, the east and west wing of the original abbess's residence were completely destroyed.

Recently there have been other changes such as the building of a motorway linking the industrial district of Liège to the port of Antwerp. This consequently encouraged a large number of firms to open premises near the main road leading out to Hasselt on the West side. The result was disastrous; the gatehouse and the vehicle of its significance, the tree-lined avenue, were cut off from the surrounding cultural landscape. A religious centre of regional importance, being transformed into a private mansion with agricultural enterprises, gradually became pushed back into a minor suburb of the municipal of Kuringen between the Albert Canal and the Demer waterway on one side and the Boudewijn highway on the other side.

These events which have occurred since the end of the 18th century, therefore explain the neglected and confused appearance of the former abbey both in an actual and a functional way.

On 5th December 1974 the whole group of buildings boughtless of great value but in a dilapidated state, was officially listed by Royal Decree.

From now on the buildings of the former abbey of Herkenrode were considered as monuments and its environment as a landscape!



Fig. 2. - Herkenrode Abbey, 16th-century residence of the abbess seen from the south east.



Fig. 3. - Herkenrode Abbey looking south east. Left to right: infirmary, 16th-century residence of the abbess, former nuns' quarters, a more recent small farm and a water-mill.

#### GENERAL PRINCIPLES GOVERNING THE RESTORATION PROGRAMME

Meanwhile in the autumn of 1972, the Regular Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre, belonging to the Priory called Sion at Bilzen in the province of Limburg, purchased a large part of the estate from its then owner, a Mr. Hermant, a Paris' architect.

The buildings referred to were the 18th century abbess's residence, rebuilt into a chateau with its surrounding landscaped grounds and the ruins of its 16th century predecessor. Since whitsuntide 1974 a thorough renovation according to the plan of a Bilzen Architect a Mr. Lavigne, has turned the redecorated 18th century, residence into a place for retirement and meditation, called «Huize Herkenrode».

In June 1974, prompted by an inner necessity, the nuns wished to establish a recognizable community in relation with — yet at a significant distance from the hospitable place for meditation.

So they decided to build a new convent within the walls of the former cistercian abbey at Herkenrode. For reasons connected with the ownership of the estate, they planned to rebuild and renovate the ruins of the 16th century-abbess's residence transforming it into a convent.

For practical reasons the building of the convent would be restricted to the east and south wing of the 16th century-abbess's residence, though it had been clear from the very beginning, that the problem could only be approached in a significant way, from a point of view that considered the historic group of buildings as a unit.

To enable a gradual approach that would make possible a permanent control, rectification and improvement, a functional model of development had to be worked out referring to the rehabilitation of the historic site of Herkenrode in general and to the ruins of the 16th century-abbess's residence in particular as a convent for the Regular Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre.

Two main questions arose. First of all, what exactly was to be understood by the notion of an up-to-date religious community of the convent of the Holy Sepulchre? And secondly, how could Herkenrode exteriorize this in a gradual way, whether or not viewed from its origin.

Clearing up these questions and pointing out what line should be adopted to arrive at concrete solutions, were the problems to be studied by the teamwork of principal and designer.

Therefore a working-group and a decision-making group were required together with the gradual settlement of a plan of development in successive stages of research, orientation and destination.

At the close of each stage this method would allow a fertile discussion with the entire community, owners and inhabitants concerned, users and public bodies involved.

Within the framework of this report it will suffice to mention the essential conclusions and general principles of the scheme development.

For the historic and architectural research there are two main sources; first of all a picture, giving a general



Fig. 4. - Herkenrode Abbey. View of the abbey from the gatehouse. Engraving by Remacle Le Loup, from *Les Délices du Pais de Liège et de la Comté de Namur*, c. 1740.

view of the abbey drawn by a surveyor called Meysman in 1669-70. Secondly there is a survey of the state of the whole site in 1768, made by L.B. Dewez, architect.

Studying these documents, it is obvious that the basic principles of Cîteaux and Clervaux concerning architectural concept and structural lay-out had been respected, when the abbey had been built according to the ideas of the abbess Mechthildis of Lechy and Prince-bishop Erard van der Marck.

This abbey hasn't been preserved except for the impressive tree-lined avenue that give entrance to the estate, the gateway with the farmstead, parts of the convent itself, the infirmary, sacristy and ruins of the abbess's residence. The significant centre with the church and the cloister however has been lost for ever.

Then there is the remarkable fact that late 18th century-abbess's residence has exteriorized a thoroughly different conception of what a convent should be both in an architectural and partial way. The abbatial abbey «wanted to give expression to the hierarchic and absolutistic way» of thinking of the Age of Baroque.

It has been this open-minded worldly architecture, secularized during the 19th century, that has been altered into a private mansion with surrounding grounds. The closed and inward-looking buildings of the original Herkenrode abbey however have been left to collapse and disappear because they lacked an up-to-date conception.

When the convent was restructured, the Regular Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre were able to offer important direction. Article 3 of the Constitutions of the Association of the Nuns of the Holy Sepulchre says that, being the spiritual heiresses of the Chapter of the Lord's Resurrection of Jerusalem, the canonesses have been given the task of forming a community dedicated to 'cultus' en 'caritas' through a life of contemplation and apostolic service, thus serving as the witnesses of the Resurrected Christ.

Both basic aspects (cultus & caritas) need to be expressed by their own special types of architecture.

On one hand 'cultus' and contemplation require the closed, inward-looking type of architecture of the cloister where as 'caritas' and apostolic service need

the extravert style of the house of retirement and meditation.

From a historic and concrete point of view this means that the nuns'cloister could develop its own identity according to the 16th century design, where as the place of retirement could witness its subservience by means of the 18th century-abbess's residence.

On the structural level this means that the two different designs, though they can't be merged outwardly, should be linked internally.

This ought to be expressed in the surrounding cultural landscape, when opening up the cloister by the 'abbatial lane' along the 16th century-gatehouse on one hand and when entering the place of retirement by the 19th 'château-lane' on the other hand.

Thus the landscaped park inside the estate related to the place of retirement, would exteriorize the well-being; whereas the archaeological remains of the central core of the original abbey would stand for the spiritual and historic significance of the convent (structu-

ral plan). From this point of view the need of a new coherence, still to be developed, is emerging.

Yet the compelling necessity remains to formulate an answer to what the community of nuns wished to express by its permanent occupancy of the convent.

A deeper understanding of the essence of what the future convent ought to be, has taken shape during numerous discussions.

The first basis that was relied on, was an actual theological treatise written by E.P.E. Lanna: The convent as local church. Theological state of affairs. (Monastic Information, number 50, 1977, pp. 75-85).

The second basis was the historic significance of the order deriving its origin from the churchbuilding of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem.

Consequently meaning and origin of the community of the Regular Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre should be traced down to the source of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem.

Fig. 5. - Herkenrode Abbey, the new residence of the abbess (1768), now a place of retirement for the Sisters of the Holy Sepulchre.



Fundamentally connected with this fact are the numerous images of the Stations of the Cross. They have been brought from the Holy Land by members of the order and by means of reproductions and chapels they have been integrated recognizably in their convents established in Europe.

In the widest sense the convent of the Holy Sepulchre has permanently been a place of pilgrimage with an exceptional powerful eschatological dimension: the Tomb of the Resurrected Christ.

So the eschatological centre of the church of the Holy Sepulchre has got a strong emotional value.

Therefore the architectural space to be designed by the convent ought to have this experienced.

The occupancy of the abbatial buildings will gradually develop from an architecturally stressed centre. That's a far better approach than strictly practising efficiency by an arrangement of functional needs and its architectonic exteriorization by an utmost symmetry and regularity.

If we return to the concrete-historic shape of the design with its own identity, we must admit that, viewed from its origin, the scattered and incoherent fragments can't give us a sufficient answer to the spatial significance desired.

Yet, if Herkenrode is to have an authentic and functional future as a convent of the Holy Sepulchre, its historic substance will have to participate in and contribute to the eschatological space.

In architectural terms this may be considered as «designing» and «permanently occupying» from an architectonic centre, the Sepulchre church.

A close study of functional relation patterns, bringing several entities of experience to life within the convent, has made clear that there are other vehicles of significance for the community.

Firstly there's the chapterhouse, the abbatial place where the community lives its life and where mutual bonds are formed as in a family.

Secondly there is the refectory, the abbatial place for physical sustenance. It's the community's place of thanksgiving as well.

In their mutual tense relationship these three vehicles of significance (Sepulchre church, chapterhouse and refectory) support the community life of the Sepulchre nuns in a spiritual and material hierarchy.

These powerful pillars allow the nuns to live their every-day lives, the novices to grow towards full membership, the cloister to open or close and the apostolic service to develop (functional plan). The development of the above architectural concept and the functional plan centres the still existing buildings of the concept

of the 16th century-abbey. These are the ruins of the nun's and abbess's quarters and the infirmary, surrounding the west wing of the former abbess's residence where the new Sepulchre church will give shape to the eschatological centre. Only part of the basement and the staircase tower in the centre remains of the east wing.

Once there has been the abbess's residence, having a representative function as well. In the future this place will leave room for two other representative places: the chapterhouse and the refectory. Above them the nuns' cells will be built. Thus the cloister will seek support of the old sickle, provided it will be renovated and completed according to the new functional principles.

The south wing is vertically connected with this historic basement. Its 16th century-eastern part has still been preserved well. On the first floor there will be working-rooms for the day-to-day running of the convent and on the ground-floor there will be locutories.

So the link, established between the original function and the new destination leaves room for a renovating approach.

During the 19th century the gatehouse has been altered into a stable, squarely linked to a pavilion. It has served as an entrance to the convent within the estate. The differently-orientated spatial significance of the original entrance will be exteriorized by curative preserving and developing of the historic architectural substance.

This nucleus can centre other aspects of the community life to a significant entity. Retirement and study put up in the ruins of the nuns' cells, are located between the historic source (the underground archaeological remains) and the religious interpretation (Sepulchre church).

The novices find themselves housed in the former 17th century-infirmary in a significant way. The building — the middle part crowned with a triangle fronton — lies at the end of the axial passage (symbolizing «being on their way»).

This axis has got an essential meaning for a functional approach to community life. Outside the estate this longitudinal axis, being a lane, is pointing into the direction of peace and inside the estate it is leading to the Sepulchre church by means of the place of retirement.

At this church the eschatological space with the nun's cells can be found, forming a transverse axis. To the world this dynamic axis settles down in the former infirmary now, being a bridge leading to the community for novices.

The west wing of the 16th century-abbess's residence



Fig. 6. Herkenrode Abbey, gatehouse.

with rooms for the teaching of music and recreation, offers the possibility to express the transition from the world to the convent via the gateway both structurally and architecturally (target plan).

In the description of the site it has already been pointed out that the historic landscape Herkenrode has lost its structural and interpreting relationship with its environment because of recent industrial interventions on a large scale.

Especially losing its functional presence is the significant relation-pattern that is expressed by the monumental avenue of lindens connecting the abbey with the road from Diest to Hasselt in the east-west direc-

tion and with the river-basin of the Herk and Hesbaye in the south. The surrounding fields and meadows however have kept their historic and functional connection with the site e.g. the abbey farm. Moreover they provide the area with a feeling of earth-bound peace that is the result of human activities.

So the present agrarian landscape expresses modesty, security and peace. That's the kind of qualitative isolation — yet viewed from a different time — space angle — that both the convent and the place of retirement wish to exteriorize.

But the procedure we have to adopt to realize this project doesn't allow it to be fitted in with an aggres-

sive, industrialized consumption-minded environment. Thus the place will have to cherish its own view on well-being propagating within itself out of the centre as a manifesto.

In its historic manifestation the 16th century-gate-house however, now property of «society» possesses the architectural power to play the part of donor

between the convent and the environment. The presence of the past (Herkenrode) and the functional occupancy of the presence (Sepulchre convent) can be «socialized» by means of this building.

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## RESUME

*L'Abbaye d'Herkenrode à Kuringen a été fondée en 1182. Les Comtes de Loon, dont les sépultures se trouvaient dans l'abbatiale, s'y intéressèrent particulièrement. En 1217, ce monastère devint la première abbaye de femmes de l'Ordre de Citeaux aux Pays-Bas. Au cours de son histoire, l'abbaye connut des périodes de décadence morale et matérielle aussi bien que des périodes de prospérité qui furent marquées par des travaux de construction. Des édifices d'origine seule survécut l'église abbatiale, de style du début de l'art gothique en Belgique. Elle fut épargnée jusqu'au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle par les transformations qui affectèrent l'abbaye. Une importante rénovation des bâtiments fut entreprise ainsi, entre 1520 et 1538. La salle capitulaire, le dortoir, le cloître, le bâtiment d'entrée et le logis des abbesses furent reconstruits, dans le style caractéristique de la région mosane, entre la fin du moyen-âge et le début de la renaissance. En 1769, Laurent-Benoît Dewez dessinait les plans d'une abbaye idéale qui devait permettre un nouveau style de vie, mais seule la résidence de l'abbesse fut construite. Après la révolution française, cette résidence devint maison de maître, tandis que les autres bâtiments furent utilisés à des fins agricoles ou industrielles et tombèrent ensuite en ruine... Puis la construction d'autoroutes et l'implantation de commerces*

*enlevèrent au paysage toute harmonie et l'ensemble monastique se trouva en rupture avec son environnement.*

*Les Chanoinesses régulières du Saint-Sépulchre acquièrent en 1972 la résidence des abbesses (XVIII<sup>e</sup>, remaniée au XIX<sup>e</sup>) ainsi que le parc et les ruines de l'abbaye du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Elles y établirent un couvent et aménagèrent une maison de retraite dans les bâtiments conventuels du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. La Communauté du Saint-Sépulchre vient de décider de construire un nouveau couvent à l'intérieur de l'ancienne abbaye cistercienne, à une certaine distance de la maison de retraite. La réhabilitation du site historique d'Herkenrode devra s'effectuer en tenant compte de l'esprit d'origine de l'ancienne abbaye, imprégnée des principes rigoureux de la Règle cistercienne, ainsi que des besoins fonctionnels d'une communauté monastique moderne. La recherche des solutions théoriques et concrètes à ce problème devra se faire dans une étroite collaboration entre le maître de l'ouvrage (les religieuses) et l'auteur du projet. Le nouveau couvent de la Communauté du Saint-Sépulchre pourra assurer l'avenir de l'abbaye d'Herkenrode, si l'étude historique et architecturale réussit à définir l'idée monacale qui inspirait l'ancienne abbaye et à la respecter dans le couvent contemporain.*

Fig. 1. - Abbaye d'Herkenrode: côté ouest, la ferme.

Fig. 2. - Abbaye d'Herkenrode: abbatiale du seizième siècle, vue du sud-est.

Fig. 3. - Abbaye d'Herkenrode: vue vers le sud-est, de gauche à droite, infirmerie, logis abbatial du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, ancien monastère, petite ferme plus récente et moulin à eau.

Fig. 4. - Abbaye d'Herkenrode: vue de l'abbaye prise du bâtiment d'entrée. Gravure de Remacle Le Loup, extraite de «Les délices du pays de Liège et du Comté de Namur» (vers 1740).

Fig. 5. - Abbaye d'Herkenrode: Le nouveau logis abbatial (1768), aujourd'hui maison de retraite des Sœurs du Saint-Sépulchre.

Fig. 6. - Abbaye d'Herkenrode: Bâtiment d'entrée.

## RESUMEN

La abadía de Herkenrode fue fundada en 1182. Los Condes de Looz, cuyas sepulturas eran en la iglesia abacial, se interesaban mucho por ella. En 1217, este monasterio se tornó en la primera abadía de mujeres de la Orden de Cister en los Países-Bajos. Durante su historia, la Abadía conoció periodos de decadencia moral y material tan como periodos de prosperidad que se tradujeron por obras de construcción. De los primeros edificios, solo se conserva hoy día la iglesia abacial que fue construida en el siglo XVI. Las transformaciones que sufrió el monasterio hasta el siglo XIX no la tocaron. Una importante renovación de los edificios tuvo lugar entre 1520 y 1538. La sala capitular, el dormitorio común, el claustro, la entrada y el palacio de las Abadesas fueron reconstruidos, en el estilo característico de la región del Mosa, entre el fin de la Edad-Media y los principios del Renacimiento. En 1769, Laurent-Benoit Dewez diseñaba los planos de una abadía ideal que debía permitir un nuevo estilo de vida, pero solo la morada de las abadesas fue construida. Después de la Revolución francesa, este palacio abacial fue tornado en morada privada, mientras los otros edificios fueron utilizados a fines agrícolas o industriales y después se cayeron en ruinas. Más tarde, la construcción de autopistas y de

comercios quitó al paisaje su armonía y el conjunto monástico se halló en ruptura con su medio ambiente.

Las canonisas regulares del Santo-Sepulcro compraron en 1972 la morada de las Abadesas (XVIII, alterada en el siglo XIX) así como el parque y las ruinas de la Abadía del Renacimiento. Crearon en Herkenrode un convento y acondicionaron los edificios conventuales del siglo XVII en un asilo para ancianos. La comunidad del Santo-Sepulcro acaba de decidir la construcción de un nuevo monasterio dentro de la antigua abadía cisterciense, a cierta distancia del asilo. La rehabilitación del sitio histórico de Herkenrode tendrá que respetar el espíritu de la antigua abadía, impregnada de los rigurosos principios de la regla cisterciense, así como los imperativos funcionales de una comunidad monástica moderna. La investigación de soluciones teóricas y concretas a tal problema tendrá que efectuarse en estrecha colaboración entre el maestro de obra (las monjas) y el arquitecto. El nuevo convento de la comunidad del Santo-Sepulcro podrá asegurar el porvenir de la Abadía de Herkenrode si los estudios histórico y arquitectural logran definir el ideal monacal que inspiraba la antigua abadía y traducirle en el convento moderno.

Fig. 1. - Abadía de Herkenrode: Lado oeste, la finca.

Fig. 2. - Abadía de Herkenrode: Iglesia abacial, vista del sudeste, del siglo XVI.

Fig. 3. - Abadía de Herkenrode: Vista hacia el sudeste; de la izquierda a la derecha: la enfermería, el palacio abacial del siglo XVI, antiguo monasterio, pequeña finca más reciente, molino de agua.

Fig. 4. - Abadía de Herkenrode: Vista de la Abadía desde la entrada. Grabado de Remacle Le Loup, en « Los deleites del País de Liège y del Condado de Namur » (cerca de 1740).

Fig. 5. - Abadía de Herkenrode: El nuevo palacio abacial (1768), hoy día asilo para ancianos de las Hermanas del Santo-Sepulcro.

Fig. 6. - Abadía de Herkenrode: Entrada.