

# cescontexto

**Monastic architecture and the city**

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Catarina Almeida Marado

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## Contents

*Catarina Almeida Marado*

Introduction .....	6
--------------------	---

### **The medieval city and mendicant architecture**

*Caroline Bruzelius*

Friars in the Medieval City: Preaching, Building and Burying.....	11
---	----

*Béla Zsolt Szakács*

Early Mendicant Architecture in Medieval Hungary .....	23
--	----

*José Ferrão Afonso*

O convento de S. Domingos e o plano urbano do Porto entre os séculos XIII e XVI .....	35
---	----

### **Religious houses and the urban space**

*Stefano Piazza*

El papel de los conjuntos conventuales en la renovación urbana de Palermo en la época de la Contrarreforma .....	52
--	----

*Domenica Sutera*

Settlement strategies of the Dominicans in Palermo from the Middle Ages to the late Baroque	64
---	----

*Anna Isabel Serra Masdeu*

El convento de San Francisco como articulador y límite de un nuevo trazado urbano en la Tarragona del s. XVIII .....	72
--	----

*Sandra Costa Saldanha*

Uma ‘Nova e Real Praça’ para o Convento do Coração de Jesus à Estrela: projecto urbano da Lisboa Mariana.....	82
---	----

*Maria Helena Ribeiro dos Santos*

A importância dos conventos no Plano da Baixa de Lisboa. Os casos do Convento de S. Domingos e do Convento de Corpus Christi..... 96

*Rita Mégre and Hélia Silva*

Os conventos na imagem urbana de Lisboa (1551-2015)..... 108

*José Manuel Garcia*

A dinâmica da ocupação do espaço em Lisboa pela Companhia de Jesus ..... 125

*Maria Angélica da Silva*

O convento franciscano e a construção da paisagem urbana no Brasil..... 139

*Isabel Norton*

Um percurso pelos contextos urbanísticos dos frades menores no Brasil colonial..... 154

### **Destruction, repurposing, and urban change**

*María Teresa Pérez Cano and Eduardo Mosquera Adell*

Sevilla ciudad conventual, urbanismo y patrimonio ..... 164

*Raquel Henriques da Silva*

O demolido Convento da Trindade em Lisboa: perdas e transposições simbólicas ..... 187

*Maria José Casanova*

Conventos suprimidos e a construção de uma nova ordem urbana no Porto ..... 203

*Margarida Relvão Calmeiro*

Apropriação e conversão do Mosteiro de Santa Cruz. Ensejo e pragmatismo na construção da cidade de Coimbra..... 227

*Sérgio Vieira, Pedro Redol, Cláudio Oliveira and Jorge Matos*

O mosteiro e a vila da Batalha - génese e evolução urbana (séc. XIV a XX)..... 241

## Introduction

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The international colloquium on “Monastic Architecture and the City”, which took place on 10th and 11th October at the Centre for Social Studies (CES), University of Coimbra (Portugal), aimed to explore the territorial and urban dimensions of the religious orders, considering the role of monastic architecture in the construction and transformation of territory, landscape and urban forms within a broad geographic and chronological span. The conference was organized within the ambit of the research project “Portuguese urban systems of monastic origin” under way at CES by the organizer of the colloquium with funding from the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). The main aim of the symposium was to bring together researchers from various academic areas to discuss the relationship between the “city” and “monastic architecture” in a diachronic perspective. The event, which took place over the course of two days, involved around 30 speakers from different countries and disciplinary areas, and the papers presented over four sessions served as a springboard for the discussion of the various themes proposed, culminating in debates at the end of each session.

With a view to continuing this discussion, this issue of the journal *Cescontexto: Debates* now brings together 17 of the texts presented and discussed at the symposium. These papers analyse this theme through a series of case studies that are very diverse, not only in chronological and geographic terms but also as regards the range of religious orders and cities covered. In different physical and historical contexts, they look at the interactions between religious houses belonging to the Franciscan, Dominican, Carmelite, Jesuit and other orders, and cities such as Lisbon, Seville and Palermo, which each had almost a hundred religious houses, or small towns where the existence of a single monastic building had fundamental significance.

These texts highlight the transnational character of the religious orders, showing how the same strategies and procedures of self-affirmation in the urban space are repeated over time, adapted where necessary to suit different contexts. They also show the importance that this architecture had in various urban contexts after the extinction of the religious communities and its continuing significance today. Given the breadth and complexity of the subject, it has not of course been possible to cover all the relevant issues; indeed, that was not our intention. But some of the most important aspects are broached from different perspectives and on different scales. In addition to the contributions made by each individual text, the dialogue that is stimulated between them raises new interpretative possibilities and may open up new fields for research.

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The texts are grouped thematically according to chronological criteria, following the broad periods established for the symposium.<sup>2</sup> We begin with a series of texts dedicated to the Late Middle Ages (Chapter 1: “The medieval city and mendicant architecture”), which is followed by another cluster dealing with the period between the 16th and 18th centuries (Chapter 2: “Religious houses and the urban space”). Finally, the last chapter focuses on the period after the extinction of the religious houses from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chapter 3: “Destruction, repurposing, and urban change”).

## The medieval city and mendicant architecture

The rapid spread of the mendicant orders around Europe on the 13<sup>th</sup> century had an important impact on medieval cities. However, the orders were only gradually integrated into urban society, often in a climate of conflict. The friars began by establishing themselves provisionally in hermitages located on the outskirts of the cities, and then slowly consolidated their presence in the urban space by constructing their own buildings. This process, which unfolded over the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, was in part determined by the need for institutionalization, and resulted in the adoption of the monastic model for the construction of their religious houses. The first two texts in this chapter focus on this aspect. Caroline Bruzelius reflects on the process through which this type of architecture was adopted by orders founded on principles of evangelical poverty and on the difficulties of implementing it in the urban context. Bela Zsolt Szakács, for his part, analyses the typological development of mendicant architecture in different urban contexts of medieval Hungary.

Considering that the pastoral and evangelical activities of the mendicants were not restricted to the interiors of their churches, Caroline Bruzelius insists that “*we therefore need to consider the architecture of mendicant convents not only of in terms of “built” structures, but also in relation to the open spaces (piazze) which were integral to public outreach*”. In this sense, the “preaching piazzas” of the Dominican convents of Parma and Florence, for example, should be understood as extensions of their churches and therefore as examples of these orders’ intervention in the urban space. The same can be seen in the Convent of São Domingos in Porto, whose importance in the changes that occurred in this city between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries is analysed by José Ferrão Afonso. In this case, the Dominican square and porch were used for religious, commercial and administrative functions, which meant they played a central role in the city.

## Religious houses and the urban space

From the 16th century onwards, the Church reforms led to a considerable increase in the number of monastic structures founded around Catholic Europe. In many cities, dense monastic networks developed, some containing dozens of religious houses, and this religious

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<sup>2</sup> The conference was organised into four sessions in accordance with the themes suggested in the Call for Papers. However, the initial thematic structure was changed slightly as a result of the papers received. The fourth theme on the contemporary city and the monastic heritage was not included due to the lack of a coherent body of papers dealing with that subject. On the other hand, the second topic, “Religious houses and the urban space”, which attracted a great deal of attention, was extended. Thus, there were in the end four sessions given over to three themes: the medieval city and mendicant architecture; religious houses and the urban space; destruction, repurposing and urban change. The analysis of contemporary problems was left for another occasion.

presence was also extended to new territories in the context of the European overseas expansion. Over the course of this period, the religious orders expanded and intensified their relationships with the cities. Some aspects of this phenomenon are dealt with over the course of this chapter, which is divided into two parts. The first focuses on the transformations produced in towns and cities by the construction or remodelling of monastic buildings. The subject is approached on different scales, beginning with an analysis of the city as a whole, then a street, followed by a square, and finally, a plan for an urban area. The second group of texts is concerned mainly with questions relating to the impact of the establishment of the religious orders on the growth of urban fabric.

The first part opens with Stefano Piazza's study of the city of Palermo, which demonstrates how the establishment of new religious houses and the renovation of existing ones in the context of the Counter Reformation (80 monastic buildings in total) produced "a colossal and radical urban renovation" which covered around 25% of the built urban fabric of the city. Next, Domenica Sutura particularizes this approach through an analysis of the alterations carried out by the Dominican monasteries existing in the same city, in a mutual dialogue between the architecture and the urban space. On a different scale, Anna Serra Masdeu shows the role that the Franciscan convent of Tarragona played in the 18th century in articulating the design of an important artery defined by the alignment of three monastic buildings; while Sandra Costa Saldanha analyses the project for a square in front of the Convent of Estrela in Lisbon as a site of representation of royal power. Finally, Maria Helena Ribeiro dos Santos describes the way in which the Convents of São Domingos and Corpus Christi in Lisbon were woven into the rigid plans for the rebuilding of the city after the earthquake of 1755.

In the second part of this chapter, Rita Megre and Hélia Silva, in a chronological study of the monastic geography of the city of Lisbon, show how the location of the religious buildings generally accompanied the dynamic of expansion of the city. This phenomenon is also confirmed by the distribution of the houses belonging to the Company of Jesus in the same city, analysed in José Manuel Garcia's text. On the other side of the Atlantic, the cases from northeast Brazil presented by Maria Angélica da Silva and the three examples described by Isabel Norton illustrate the strong Franciscan presence in Brazilian cities and towns. These studies show that the symbiotic relationship between the religious buildings and the cities also exists in that geographic space, perhaps even more strongly.

Some of the texts in this chapter also show that the religious orders were not the only protagonists in these processes. Various other agents were involved in the construction or remodelling of these religious houses, ranging from monarchs and ecclesiastical authorities to municipalities, nobility and burghers, and monastic architecture often served as a means through which various social classes affirmed themselves in different social, economic and political contexts.

## **Destruction, repurposing, and urban change**

In the 19th century, in some European countries, the extinction of the religious orders and consequent disentanglement of their properties had an enormous impact on both the religious buildings and the cities. After extinction, the monasteries continued to function as polarizing elements, directly or indirectly promoting changes to the urban fabric in a process that has continued until today. The extinction of the religious institutes and the subsequent management of their buildings was a complex process, full of imprecisions and indecisions, in which the properties oscillated between being given over to public service and sold into private ownership. There were requests for the installation of facilities for very different



public uses, ranging from military headquarters, to hospitals, schools, courts and administrative departments; however, these applications were often subordinated to private interests, which aimed to use these buildings mainly as factories or as private residences. In the meantime, some of them were ultimately demolished in order to make way for new buildings, or to improve traffic circulation and to enable the renovation and growth of the urban areas.

The texts presented in this chapter approach the extinction of the religious houses as an urban issue, aiming to demonstrate their importance in the transformation of the cities in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. As such, they offered physical support for the implementation of the public facilities of the new Liberal state, as well as providing an opportunity for private intervention, and grounds for the reformulation of the city in the light of the hygienist concepts of the period, both through the urbanization of their lands and the cost of alteration and demolition of the buildings. The first paper concerns the city of Seville, whose cluster of 94 monastic buildings accounts for a significant portion of its urban heritage. This study by Maria Teresa Perez Cano and Eduardo Mosquera Adell begins by reflecting on the historical process by which the various religious orders established themselves in the city over a period of six centuries, and then goes on to analyse the effects of secularization upon the buildings, urban spaces and religious communities. Of these 17 female religious houses still remain in the city, constituting a living fragment of the “ciudad conventual”.

This is followed by case studies of the Portuguese cities of Lisbon, Porto and Coimbra. Of the three, the most expressive case is certainly the first, which is considered by Raquel Henriques da Silva with regard to the demolition of the Convent of Trindade. The extinction of the religious houses had a greater impact upon Lisbon than upon any of the other Portuguese cities. This text reflects upon the contexts of extinction and the process of attributing a use to this extinct convent, which was initially designated as a court, before being demolished to make space for a street (Rua Nova da Trindade), housing plots and a brewery. In Porto, Maria José Casanova analyses the process of transforming the extensive area occupied by the extinct convents of São Domingos, São Francisco and São João Novo into the new commercial and financial centre of the city, an intervention that partially destroyed these monastic areas and resulted in the urbanization of their lands. In the case of Coimbra, Margarida Relvão explains how, after the extinction, all the administrative functions of the city were concentrated in the extinct Monastery of Santa Cruz, and how the break-up of its lands (which covered a greater area than any of the old city quarters) enabled the Upper and Lower Towns to be connected and opened up a new direction for urban expansion.

Finally, Sérgio Vieira, Pedro Redol, Cláudio Oliveira and Jorge Matos present the case of Batalha, a Portuguese town built in the shadow of an important Dominican convent founded by King John I to commemorate the Portuguese victory in the Battle of Aljubarrota. This religious house was one of a small group of buildings that were saved from public auction because of their historical and artistic value, and therefore suffered a different fate from the others. Freed from their former function, they acquired the status of “national monuments” and underwent conservation and restoration. However, these works were not restricted to the buildings, but involved the whole of the surrounding spaces. The Monastery and town of Batalha was one of these cases. This text analyses how the interventions designed to “valorise” this “national monument” extended throughout the town producing important alterations to its structure and creating a totally new urban landscape around the monastery.