

The 2007-2008 first-year students present their Integrated Project Work



Jury members Paul Lievevrouw, Luc Verpoest, Barbara van der Wee, Wolfgang Jung, Krista De Jonge, Koen Van Balen, Joris Capenbergs, and Daniele Pini pondering – © Mario Santana

Saint John’s Hospital, Bruges

By Veronica Heras (architect, Ecuador), Dalia Nabil (interior architect, Egypt), Thomas De Vos (archaeologist-art historian, Belgium), Giannis Tsatsos (engineer architect, Greece), Ben De Vriendt (archaeologist, Belgium).

This integrated project work has tried to understand a building – in this case the convent of the *Sint-Janshospitaal* at Bruges – in all its dimensions. The principal aim of this study is the rehabilitation of the chosen building in its urban and historical context. After a while, we realized the complexity of this subject. Not only the building but the whole site *Oud Sint-Jan* is in a problematic situation.

Different analyses were carried out concerning the history, the typology, the structure, materials and pathologies of the building; the circulation towards and inside and the actual functions of the site.



Master plan proposal – All drawings © RLICC

By combining the results of those analyses, answers could be found to questions that came out during the studies and visits. This diagnosis helped us further to evaluate the qualities and values of the site as of the building. This was the basis to elaborate and to define finally a conservation-restoration project proposal for the rehabilitation of the building and to establish guidelines – as a master plan – for the revalorization of the site in order to give back its identity.



Understanding the building in its context

The city of Bruges is identified as a **World Heritage Site** with its urban weaknesses and opportunities. Regarding the morphological development of the city, the site of *Oud Sint-Jan* was located at its foundation around 1150 near to an important entrance gate. The first fortification wall of the historic city cut the later site into two.



At that time, the *Sint-Janshospitaal* was the only socio-medical institution in the city of Bruges. The medieval hospital was however functioning in a different way than nowadays. A community of lay brothers and sisters were taking care of sick persons, travellers, etc. We have to consider that during the medieval times, *'when going to the hospital meant finding a place that provided shelter, food and religious guidance while waiting to die'*. The *Sint-Janshospitaal* included a huge refreshing green medieval garden where patients could relax. This enclosed garden was the perfect place where the soul of the patient could be cured; the body got welfare inside. It represented an oasis of quietness within an economical growing city. The quietness of this open space contrasted with the crowded commercial life in the streets of Bruges; once merchants, today tourists. Times changed; more functional space was needed as the hospital expanded more and more; green became parking. Blocked for further expansions, the hospital moved in the year 1976 out of the historic city centre and a new one was built on the outskirts.

(Above) South view – (Left) East gable of convent

The old hospital complex became a problematic zone for the historic city of Bruges. The restoration of the neoclassical hospital as a Congress Centre was a convenient solution for the city to get rid of an area of problems. As this whole hospital complex was abandoned since the seventies, problems were gathering there. The intention of those investors to expand those facilities would however harm the original spirit of the place as we have shown through our analyses.

Different services are indeed installed in the buildings of the former hospital. Dividing the site, those several independent actors confer a fragmented picture to the site. Its historical unity is lost. As the site is still nowadays an open space inside the city, it lost its closeness. It became a crossing point for a lot of traffic. Whereas the monuments are still preserved, the spirit of the site is lost.



Roof – © Mario Santana

Understanding the building

The convent was built in the year 1539 as the living place for the nuns. The building itself was therefore meant to have a residential function. The sisters took over the administration of the hospital between the year 1620 and the French Revolution. Afterwards, they continued to work as nurses in the hospital. Most of them left with the hospital the site in the year 1976 for a new convent, adjacent to the new hospital. The last nuns finally left the convent in the year 2005. Since then, the building is used as the back offices for the department of Tourism of the city of Bruges. Although those offices occupy the ground floor of the convent, its first floor and the attic remain abandoned.

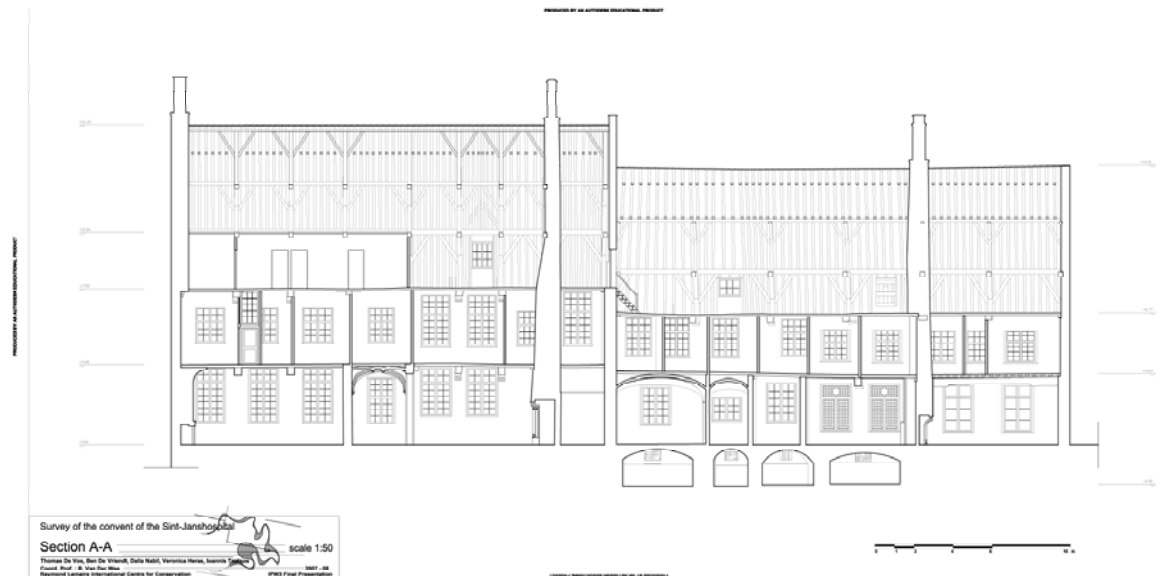


1907 – © Stadsarchief Brugge

Over its time of occupation, the building itself has known a lot of transformations, as extensions and restoration and renovation works were carried out. The convent includes four different buildings, constructed over time and added one to another over a time span of nearly 200 years. Afterwards, the building was embellished. The accumulation of wealth by the sisters allowed them to execute during the 18th century a complete renovation of the interior of the ground floor. In the 19th century, the external façades were transformed in order to embellish it. Those interventions followed the mood of the time, as did the earlier ones. The whole of Bruges was restored in order to accentuate its medieval character.

Those historical facts could be combined with the graphical documentation of the building. The drawings helped to understand some of the intervening (but not documented by archives) changes. We discovered for example that the first building of the convent had in its original state a different shape. This survey helped us further to document the technical analysis of the materials and the structure of the building. To accommodate a new function, the stability of the building – especially of the first floor and the attic – has to be ensured. For this potential function, regulations about security and fire have also to be taken into account.

East-West section through the building



Evaluating the building and the site

All those analyses helped us finally to establish the guidelines to follow for the master plan of the site and the conservation-restoration project for the building. The values of the building and of the site are defined to outline those guidelines. Administrative aspects elucidated the legal framework in which the project has to be inscribed. To develop our ideas further for a rehabilitation project, we compared our site with other convents on former hospital sites. The convent of the *Sint-Pieter hospital* in *Leuven* for example was converted into a cultural centre. Those comparisons were accompanied by an evaluation which allowed us to comprehend the advantages and disadvantages of those sites.

Rehabilitating the building and the site

Finally, we could develop a conservation – restoration project with the aim of rehabilitating the building; as well as a master plan to revalorize the site of *Oud Sint-Jan*.

The master plan tries to recreate the historical spirit of the place. Referring to the hay-day of the site during the past, we aren't attempting to reconstruct exactly its arrangement as it was in the past. This is an idealized picture which is too idyllic to be realistic. The site would be however closed again by housing on its southern, western and north-western part. This would allow us to reinvent a green refreshing open space inside the housing block. The unity of the hospital fabric is guaranteed by its new function as a huge museum and exhibition hall. The medieval and neoclassical hospital as well as the cloister and the convent are linked together by a Museum circuit. Distributed in all buildings, the display would be more compatible with the interior architecture.

Some impressions of the proposed annex to the West



The convent would be inscribed in this museum context. Different proposals for a conservation-restoration project came into our mind. To choose the best one, we applied the multi- criteria analysis. This economical analysis insists more on qualitative rather than on quantitative economical aspects. Besides this economical evaluation for the conservation-restoration proposals, the master plan was compared to the scenario for the site, resulting from its planned projects. By all this, we were finally able to define better our definite project-proposal for the convent. The convent will functionally be divided into two parts. The ground floor will be inscribed into the Museum circuit and the first floor would accommodate offices. The attic would be used for several meetings, conferences or additional offices.



The connection towards the neoclassical hospital would be ensured by an underground tunnel. Coming from this last one, a new building is going to organize the circulation towards the convent. This new intervention would be added to the convent. Taking into account the shape of the former buildings of the convent, this new addition is going to follow the construction-rhythm of the convent. Step by step, a new building was added. We are going to do the same in erecting a new building. The place to build the next building would be left to the future generation, when it's going to be their turn.

Respecting the ancient structure, the new intervention wouldn't harm the former convent. The link between both would be ensured by glass. As the new circulation point for the convent, this new building would include all the facilities needed for new use of the building as a staircase, a lift and toilets. In this way, the convent of the *Sint-Janhospitaal* would be rehabilitated and it would in a certain way find back its identity as the turning point, the administration head for the complex of *Oud Sint-Jan*.

