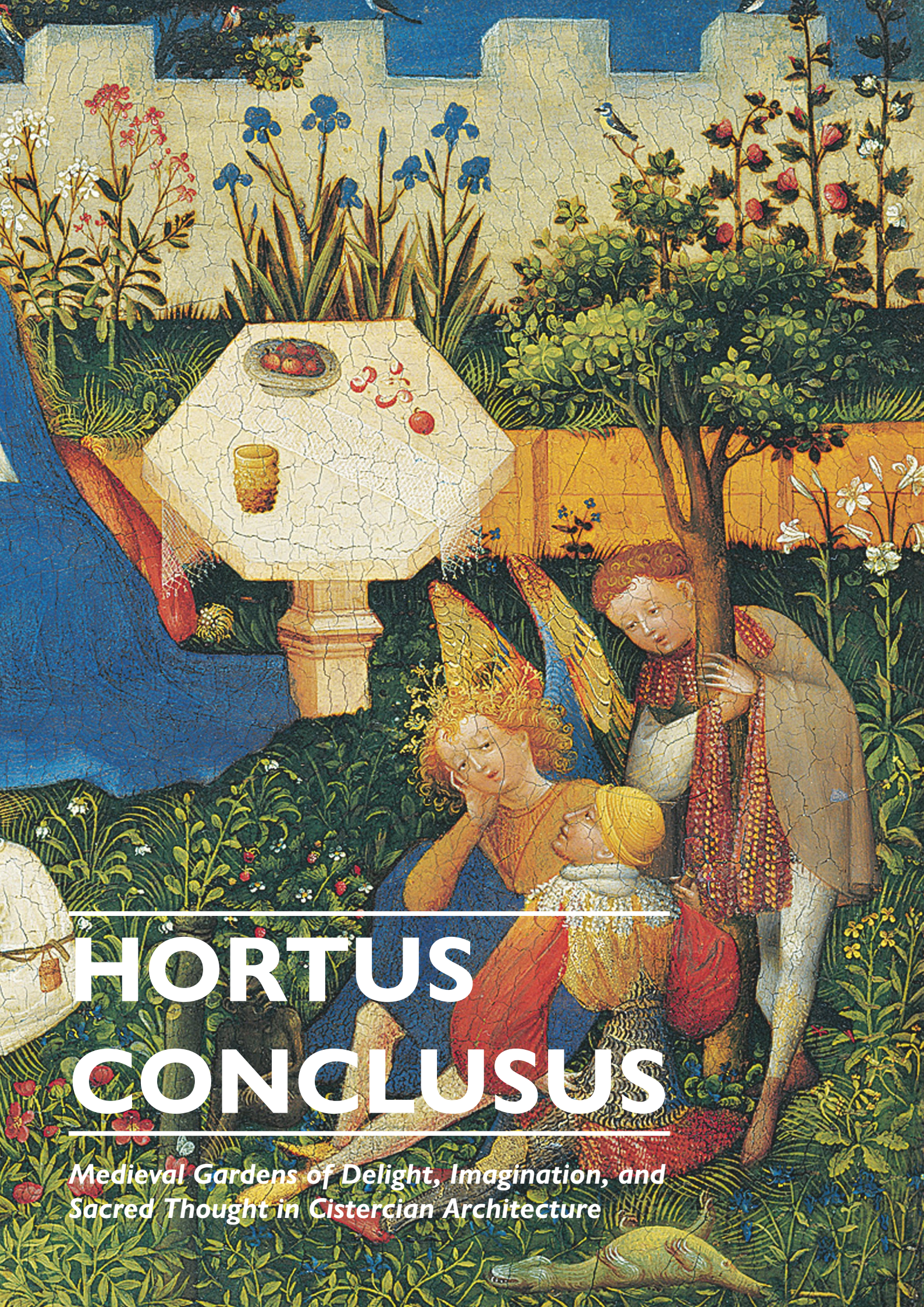

HORTUS CONCLUSUS

Medieval Gardens of Delight, Imagination, and Sacred Thought in Cistercian Architecture

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School of Architecture, Urban Planning and Construction Engineering

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Medieval Gardens of Delight, Imagination, and Sacred Thought in Cistercian Architecture

Tesi di Laurea Magistrale in

Architectural Design and History

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A rose blooms in the winter...

To our Paradise Lost

and to Man's First Disobedience

beacuse All is not Lost.

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Abstract

To the medieval mind, the garden was a construct rich in symbolic, theological, and moral significance. From the Garden of Eden to the hortus conclusus of the Virgin Mary, medieval gardens were inscribed with notions of paradise, purity, and redemption, while in secular narratives, they served as settings for desire, courtship, and adventure, entwined with the locus amoenus tradition and classical pastoral imagery.

This thesis examines the interplay of symbolic meanings associated with the garden in medieval thought, while focusing specifically on its architectural materialization in the Cistercian cloister. As an order defined by austerity, purism, and spiritual discipline, the Cistercians transformed the garden into a space of contemplation, order, and sacred silence, distanced from the ornate, amorous, and often playful gardens of contemporary courtly culture. By analysing monastic texts, theological writings, and the spatial organization of Cistercian monasteries, this research investigates how the cloister garden embodied both a spiritualized vision of nature and an architectural expression of the Cistercian ethos.

Through this lens, the thesis not only traces the cultural and symbolic genealogy of the medieval garden but also proposes a conceptual intervention within a historical Cistercian cloister. This design-research exercise aims to reinterpret the cloister's spatial logic and sensory experience, making visible its enduring potential as a site of reflection and sacred thought in the contemporary imagination.

Introduction

Throughout the Middle Ages, the garden occupied a unique position at the intersection of theology, philosophy, and daily life. As both image and reality, it was a space where nature became intelligible through faith and moral allegory — a "book" to be read as much as a landscape to be inhabited. The hortus conclusus, the enclosed garden of the Virgin Mary, and the paradisiacal imagery of the Garden of Eden together formed a symbolic continuum that shaped how medieval culture understood purity, temptation, and salvation.

Within this symbolic universe, monastic architecture provided one of the most tangible articulations of the sacred garden: the cloister. Nowhere was this expression more rigorous and spiritually charged than in the monasteries of the Cistercian Order. Founded in the late eleventh century as a reform of Benedictine monasticism, the Cistercians sought to recover the simplicity and poverty of the early monks. Their rejection of ornament, their emphasis on clarity and function, and their profound integration of nature and architecture made the cloister garden a space of disciplined contemplation — a hortus conclusus both literal and metaphoric.

This thesis investigates how symbolic notions of the garden were transformed by Cistercian spirituality into an architectural experience of silence, order, and reflection. It examines the cloister not merely as a typological feature of monastic design, but as a physical manifestation of theological ideas concerning purity, enclosure, and the relationship between human and divine order. By drawing on monastic writings, theological treatises, and the material and spatial organization of Cistercian monasteries, the research situates the cloister garden within the wider medieval imagination of paradise and moral discipline.

Beyond historical interpretation, the thesis extends into design-research. Through the analysis of a selected Cistercian site, it proposes a contemporary architectural intervention that reinterprets the spatial and sensory logic of the cloister.

This exercise seeks to reactivate the cloister's contemplative essence within a modern context, revealing how its architectural language of restraint and silence can still foster reflection in an increasingly distracted world.

The research thus operates on two complementary levels: as a study of the medieval hortus conclusus and as a contemporary design inquiry. Together, these approaches aim to demonstrate the enduring relevance of the Cistercian cloister — not only as a monument of the past, but as a living paradigm for thinking about space, nature, and the sacred in architecture today.

Context and Relevance

The study of medieval gardens has traditionally been approached through literary analysis, art history, and theological interpretation. Scholars have examined the symbolic structures of the hortus conclusus, its role in Marian devotion, its presence in courtly literature, and its connections to Edenic and paradisiacal imagery. Parallel to this, the architectural history of the Cistercian Order has been widely documented, with extensive research into its material austerity, monastic reforms, and distinctive spatial organization. Yet these two fields—garden symbolism and Cistercian architecture—have seldom been brought into direct dialogue.

This thesis addresses that gap by examining the cloister garden as a point of convergence between symbolic imagination and architectural reality. While the cloister is often studied as a typological feature of monastic architecture, its garden is rarely analyzed as a symbolic construct shaped by specific theological and cultural forces. The Cistercian cloister, in particular, offers a unique case: a space where the garden is stripped of ornamentation, emptied of narrative iconography, and reconfigured into a disciplined geometry that mirrors the order's spiritual ideals. Understanding how this transformation occurred illuminates the broader medieval relationship between nature, spirituality, and built form.

The relevance of this topic extends beyond historical inquiry. Contemporary architectural discourse continues to grapple with themes of silence, minimalism, sensory reduction, and the relationship between architecture and nature—issues deeply embedded in Cistercian design philosophy. The order's approach to materiality, light, proportion, and landscape integration remains influential in modern architectural practices, from monastic design to contemporary minimalism. By reconsidering the cloister garden as an experiential and symbolic device, this thesis contributes to ongoing conversations about how historical spatial models can inform present-day design thinking.

Additionally, in an era where built environments are increasingly shaped by distraction, overstimulation, and environmental degradation, the Cistercian cloister offers an alternative paradigm: one that foregrounds restraint, contemplation, and a humble engagement with nature. Through the design-research intervention developed in the later chapters, the thesis demonstrates how historical spatial logics can be reinterpreted to generate new forms of architectural reflection today.

By situating medieval garden symbolism within the architectural specificity of the Cistercian cloister—and by extending this inquiry into contemporary practice—the research positions the cloister not only as an artifact of medieval spirituality but as a timeless model for understanding how space can shape thought, perception, and inner life. In this sense, the study speaks simultaneously to medievalists, architectural historians, and contemporary designers seeking new ways to rethink the relationship between space, nature, and the sacred.

Research Aims & Questions

Through this study, the thesis seeks to clarify the relationship between theological ideas, cultural narratives, and architectural practice, while also demonstrating the continued relevance of Cistercian spatial principles for contemporary design.

The project aims to (1) trace the symbolic genealogy of the medieval hortus conclusus and its theological meanings; (2) demonstrate how Cistercian spirituality re materialised this symbolism in the cloister garden's spatial logic; and (3) test the contemporary relevance of that logic for designing contemplative environments. These aims generate three core questions:

1. How do monastic texts (e.g., Bernard of Clairvaux) articulate garden symbolism as a locus of purity, enclosure, and divine order?

2. In what ways does the Cistercian cloister garden embody architectural expressions of austerity, light, and proportion distinct from courtly garden traditions?

3. Can a design research intervention that re interprets the cloister's spatial and sensory qualities offer a viable model for modern minimalist architecture?

Methodology

1. Textual Analysis – Close reading of primary Cistercian sources (Bernard's writings, Statuta) to extract theological concepts of the garden.

2. Architectural Survey – Comparative study of Cistercian monastery plans, materiality, and garden typologies using secondary scholarship on Cistercian purism and spatial hierarchy.

3. Symbolic Mapping – Correlate garden symbols (hortus conclusus, Edenic motifs) with architectural elements, drawing on garden history literature.

4. Case Study – Detailed examination of a selected Cistercian cloister (site analysis, measurement, on site observation) to test the hypothesised symbolic architectural links.

5. Design Research Intervention – Develop conceptual sketches and material prototypes that amplify restraint and contemplation, then evaluate their experiential impact through user observation and reflective interviews.

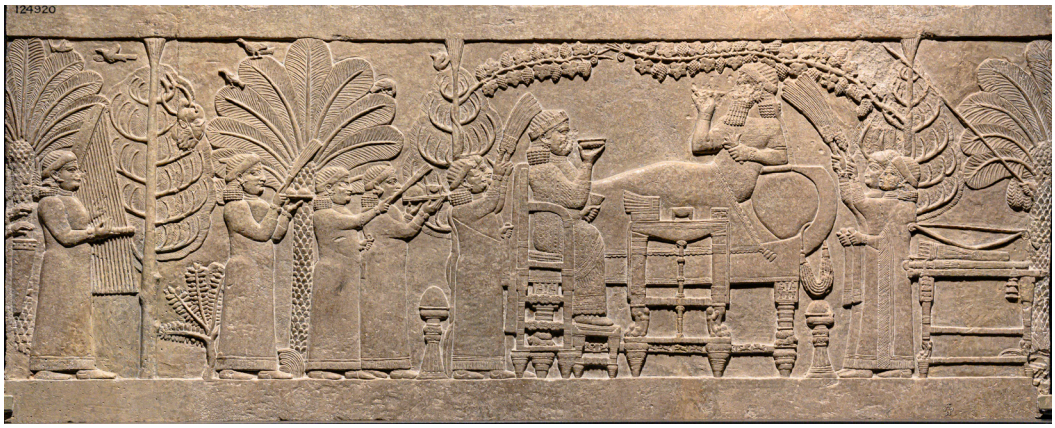

Figure 1. Assyrian Relief of the Banquet of Ashurbanipal From Nineveh N Palace, Gypsum, British Museum. 645-650 BCE. (phot by © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

Chapter 1

The Garden in the Medieval Imagination: Symbolism, Allegory, and Space

1.1 The Garden as Paradise: Eden and celestial gardens in religious thought.

The medieval imagination inherited a rich symbolic legacy from Biblical and patristic sources, in which the garden operated simultaneously as a biblical archetype, a symbolic conduit, and a lived space. At the center of this symbolic universe stood the Garden of Eden — a locus of primordial harmony and, simultaneously, of loss and temptation, which haunted medieval theological and cultural consciousness. Medieval commentaries on Genesis consistently interpreted Eden as both a historical locus and an allegory for the soul's lost unity with God (Fig. 1 and fig. 2). As Jean Delumeau argues, **Eden functioned simultaneously as a memory of a lost paradise and a model for the heavenly future promised to the faithful**[1]. This dual temporality — backward-looking and eschatological — rendered the garden a privileged site for negotiating salvation, desire, and discipline.

From the Hanging Gardens of Babylon onward, the garden has also been understood as the place of the soul and as the Earthly Paradise. The landscape of Eden—

1 Delumeau, Jean. Storia del paradiso: il giardino delle delizie. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994.

Figure 2. The Garden, fresco from Nebamun tomb, originally in Thebes, Egypt. (photo by © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

archetype and myth—reproduced, in its biblical transfiguration, the ancient gardens of Mesopotamia described by Gilgamesh (king of Uruk around 2700 BCE) in his epic poem. The very etymological trajectory of the garden thus leads back to deeply symbolic meanings: the Christian Paradise in fact takes its name from the Persian pairi-daeza, which became the Hebrew pardes and later the Greek paradeisos. To the garden-paradise, Greek civilization also associated the kēpos, rendered in Latin as hortus: a cultivated space defined by boundaries and enclosure, which would find its direct development in the garden as hortus conclusus. The roots of this concept can be traced to the Indo-European term ghordho, later garten, indicating an enclosed, protected space, clearly defined in its dimensions.

In this sense, every garden is a precinct: the very form and idea of the garden bear witness to this. It arises from a definition and valorization of space—inside/outside, closed/open—accompanied by a shifting conception of time—eternity/temporality. The artificial barrier—marked on the ground or determined by the gaze of the mind—both divides and unites different spaces and times, creating alterity. Exploring the figure of the garden requires a double movement—inside and outside—an examination that considers the dialectical tension that develops at the boundaries. The ideal configuration of the enclosure cannot be understood without reference to that which stands in opposition to it.

Within the Western enclosed garden, nature encounters an exceptional equilibrium with the order imposed by rational design, by spatial geometry, and by the selection of plants and fruits, where the pursuit of maximum aesthetic effect accompanies the dimension of utility. Yet the enclosed green space—often sealed by walls that render it initiatory and precious—always retains a strong symbolic value: a world within a world, a private Eden, a place of delight or recollection, of initiation and spiritual catharsis. The cloister garden, in particular, may be understood as a place of meditated perfection of sacred space, but also as an abstract island, a refuge and self-sufficient microcosm. Whether isolated within woodland or embedded in the densest urban fabric, it remains complete in itself, closed off from the outside by walls and gates.

Within this theological framework, the hortus conclusus became one of the most charged devotional images of the Middle Ages. Rooted in the "garden enclosed" of the Song of Songs (4:12) **"hortus conclusus, soror mea, sponsa; hortus conclusus,**

Figure 3. Lochner, Stefan. Madonna in the Rose Garden (Madonna im Rosenhag). Ca. 1450. Oil on panel. Wallraf-Richartz Museum & Fondation Corboud, Cologne. (photo by Wallraf-Richartz Museum & Fondation Corboud. Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

fons signatus"[2] it emerged from exegetical traditions that identified the bridegroom with Christ and the bride with the Church — an allegory that was later mystically transferred to the Virgin Mary herself. Through this process, the enclosed garden became a visual and spatial shorthand for divine love, recasting erotic longing as sacred devotion. The garden thus mediated between male desire and divine union, allowing affective spirituality to operate through sensorial and spatial metaphors.

By the twelfth century, Marian devotion increasingly emphasized the Virgin's immaculate purity, and the hortus conclusus came to signify not merely enclosure but absolute inviolability. Mary's womb was portrayed as a sealed garden — a theological embodiment of the Immaculate Conception and her exemption from original sin (Fig. 3). As the "second Eve," Mary reversed the deadly consequences of the first Eve's transgression: where Eve's garden became the site of the Fall, Mary's garden dispensed redemption, healing, and grace. Studies by Aben and De Wit demonstrate how this image evolved from scriptural metaphor into a fully developed visual and spatial motif, represented in illuminated manuscripts, panel paintings, and architectural ornamentation[3].

Crucially, the hortus conclusus was not only allegorical but materially present. It was a real, walled enclosure that housed medicinal herbs, provided restorative environments for monasteries and hospitals, and embodied a prelapsarian Eden capable of healing body and soul together. Yoshikawa argues that the Marian garden functioned as a symbolic site of healing — both bodily and spiritual — reinforcing Mary's role as mediatrix between divine grace and human fragility[4]. Aromatic and medicinal plants depicted in Marian imagery — roses, lilies, violets, iris — carried therapeutic associations alongside symbolic meanings, linking purity with physical restoration.

Beyond Marian devotion, the garden symbolized the celestial paradise awaiting the redeemed. Medieval visionary texts and iconography frequently depicted heaven as an idealized garden filled with ordered nature, flowing water, and radiant vegetation. As noted by Fagiolo and Giusti, this imagery drew from antique, Jewish, Islamic, and

2 Song of Songs 4:12, Vulgate: "Hortus conclusus, soror mea, sponsa; hortus conclusus, fons signatus." English translation: "A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a garden enclosed, a sealed spring" (New Revised Standard Version).
3 Aben, R., and S. De Wit. The Enclosed Garden: History and Development of the Hortus Conclusus and Its Reintroduction into the Present-Day Urban Landscape. 010 Publishers, 1999.
4 Yoshikawa, N. K. "The Virgin in the Hortus Conclusus: Healing the Body and Healing the Soul." Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality 50, no. 1 (2015): 11–32.

Figure 4. Miniature in an codice by Francis I, the image is also a representation of a medieval hortus conclusus. In Vercelloni, Matteo, Virgilio Vercelloni, con la collaborazione di Paola Gallo. L'invenzione del giardino occidentale. Milano: Electa, 2003, 25.

Christian sources, converging in a unified symbolic geography of salvation[5]. The garden's orderliness — symmetry, enclosure, cultivated nature — was not merely aesthetic but theological: it expressed divine rationality, purity, and the restoration of cosmic harmony.

In the late Middle Ages, the symbolic garden crystallizes the multiple layers of meaning accumulated throughout centuries of European cultural history. Positioned as a liminal space between two worlds—nature and artifice, exterior territory and interior order—the garden becomes a privileged site for the convergence of political, economic, moral, and spiritual values. Its form is not merely ornamental, but profoundly emblematic, lending itself to complex symbolic and iconological interpretation.

Illuminated manuscripts of the period offer particularly eloquent representations of this condition (Fig. 4). In certain late medieval miniatures, the garden is depicted in deliberate contrast with the surrounding landscape: castles articulate the territorial network of power and governance; cultivated fields and forests evoke the agricultural economy sustaining that power; while beyond the walls, spontaneous vegetation and insects signify untamed nature. The enclosing wall establishes a decisive rupture between these domains, transforming the garden into a sacred and private space, accessible only to a select few.

Within this enclosed realm, allegorical figures articulate a moral and intellectual program. Nature presides at the threshold, holding the keys to the garden, while the interior hosts personifications of Love, Virtue, and Wisdom. The garden thus functions as a didactic space, where ethical and philosophical ideals are spatially staged. Its ordered layout—regular planting beds, valuable herbs and flowers, and carefully positioned trees—reinforces the sense of a rationally structured microcosm. Even the walls themselves participate in this logic, becoming surfaces for trained vegetation such as rose gardens, which visually dissolve the boundary while symbolically completing the enclosed world.

The hortus conclusus of the late Middle Ages therefore operates as a total spatial construct: a closed, coherent universe in which nature is disciplined, meanings are layered, and ideals are made visible. This model extends beyond monastic contexts, influencing the temporary transformation of castle courtyards and urban residences

5 Fagiolo, Marcello, and Maria Adriana Giusti. Lo specchio del paradiso: l'immagine del giardino dall'antico al Novecento. Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana, 1996.

Figure 5. Limbourg Brothers, Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry (1410–1416) Raymond Cazelles et Johannes Rathofer (préf. Umberto Eco), Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, Tournai, La Renaissance du Livre, 2001 (1re éd. 1988)

for courtly celebrations, where floral trellises and vegetal scenography recreate, even if ephemerally, the atmosphere of the enclosed garden. In this way, the symbolic garden anticipates later developments while remaining deeply rooted in a medieval conception of space as allegory, order, and threshold.

Within this symbolic constellation, the monastic cloister emerged as a tangible architectural transposition of paradise. As Horn's foundational study shows, early medieval cloisters were often conceptualized as microcosms of Eden: enclosed, centered around water, and ritually traversed as part of daily monastic life[6]. Yet unlike courtly or Marian gardens, the cloister translated paradisiacal symbolism into a disciplined, communal, and ascetic spatial order — a transformation that would become central to Cistercian architectural ideology.

1.2 The Garden of Love: Secular, courtly, and allegorical gardens as spaces of desire, ritual, and power.

While religious symbolism elevated the garden as a locus of purity and divine harmony, medieval secular literature developed an equally influential but contrasting tradition: the garden of love. Courtly romances and lyric poetry reimagined the garden not as a space of salvation but of desire, encounter, and ritualized eroticism. Drawing on classical pastoral motifs and the tradition of the locus amoenus, these gardens were depicted as idyllic settings — shaded groves, flowering meadows, clear springs — where lovers met, identities were revealed, and narratives of seduction unfolded.

Winston-Allen identifies these gardens as "spaces of earthly delight," functioning as stages for performative courtship and aristocratic play[7]. The Roman de la Rose, perhaps the most influential medieval allegorical poem, transformed the garden into a symbolic landscape of desire, populated by personifications of traits such as Idleness, Delight, Courtesy, and Resistance. As Küster notes, the imagery of the garden in such literature was deeply tied to its symbolic accessibility: enclosed yet open, cultivated yet natural, a controlled environment that generated emotional and social meaning[8].

6 Horn, Walter. "On the Origins of the Medieval Cloister." Gesta 12, no. 1/2 (1973): 13–52.
7 Winston-Allen, Anne. "Gardens of Heavenly and Earthly Delight: Medieval Gardens of the Imagination." Neuphilologische Mitteilungen 99, no. 1 (1998): 83–92.
8 Küster, Hansjörg. History of the Garden: From the Garden of Eden to the Present Day. Translated by David Black. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.

Figure 6. Upper Rhenish Master. The Garden of Paradise (Frankfurt Paradiesgärtlein). Ca. 1410. Tempera and oil on panel. Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main. (photo by Städel Museum – U. Edelmann. Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

This secular tradition overlapped with religious imagery in complex ways. The garden could be a symbol of innocence or temptation, purity or seduction. Blooms has shown how the rose — a key motif in both Marian iconography and courtly love literature — shifted between representing virginal purity and erotic allure depending on context[9]. These dual meanings complicated the medieval perception of gardens, allowing them to function as ambivalent symbolic spaces.

Moreover, courtly gardens were also instruments of social and political power. As Turner argues, aristocratic gardens were sites for displaying cultural refinement, wealth, and mastery over nature[10]. They were thus integrated into broader structures of feudal identity and social hierarchy (Fig. 3).

The coexistence of sacred and courtly garden traditions gave medieval culture a rich symbolic vocabulary — one that the Cistercians would later respond to, reject, or reinterpret through their own austere architectural approach.

1.3 The Garden as Cultural Discourse: Gender, purity, temptation, and enclosure.

The medieval garden functioned not only as a literary and theological metaphor but as a cultural discourse shaped by anxieties surrounding gender, purity, embodiment, and control. Its defining characteristic — enclosure — made it an especially potent symbol in discussions of chastity, virginity, temptation, and moral discipline.

The hortus conclusus exemplifies this dynamic. As Aben and De Wit emphasize, the enclosure of the garden reinforced notions of female containment and virtue[11]. The walls that protected the Marian garden from intrusion were mirrored in architectural and institutional practices surrounding women: convents, domestic courtyards, hospital gardens, and the regulated movement of noblewomen within aristocratic households.

9 Blooms, Victoria. "Rose Blooms in the Winter: The Tradition of the Hortus Conclusus and Its Significance as a Devotional Emblem." First published December 12, 2013.
10 Turner, Tom. Garden History: Philosophy and Design, 2000 BC–2000 AD. London: Routledge, 2005.
11 Aben, R., and S. De Wit. The Enclosed Garden: History and Development of the Hortus Conclusus and Its Reintroduction into the Present-Day Urban Landscape. 010 Publishers, 1999.

The garden thus became a spatial metaphor for the female body — cultivated, enclosed, and morally surveilled.

At the same time, the garden was persistently associated with temptation. Medieval exegesis often interpreted Eve's actions in Eden not merely as disobedience but as a symbolic failure of enclosure — a breach that allowed sin, disorder, and mortality to enter the world. Delumeau notes that this reading contributed to a lasting association between gardens, femininity, and moral vulnerability[12]. The Virgin's sealed garden was therefore constructed in direct opposition to Eve's open one, reinforcing a gendered moral binary between danger and redemption.

Yet medieval discourse remained deeply ambivalent. While Marian imagery celebrated nurturing femininity and healing power, theological rhetoric simultaneously portrayed women as biologically weak and morally dangerous — "the gateway of the devil." This tension was particularly evident in the association of women with medicinal knowledge. The enclosed garden housed curative herbs and was frequently linked to female spirituality and healing practices, positioning women as both custodians of bodily restoration and sources of potential disorder.

Recent scholarship has complicated this binary interpretation. Rather than viewing the medieval garden as a stable gendered symbol, scholars increasingly describe it as an unstable, multigendered site that both reinforced and subtly subverted hegemonic norms. Its "thin" spatial quality — neither wholly private nor fully public, neither purely sacred nor secular — allowed for slippages in meaning. Within this ambiguity, the garden could host queer potentialities that destabilized fixed gender roles and rigid binaries, enabling what some theorists describe as a strategic "reading with the eyes closed," attentive to hidden resistances embedded in spatial form.

Gendered interpretations extended into courtly narratives as well. The "garden of love" frequently staged encounters in which the woman's body was symbolically aligned with the garden itself — tended, enclosed, cultivated, or violated. Yoshikawa observes that this conflation had profound implications for medieval conceptions of purity, desire, agency, and control[13]. The same spatial metaphors that governed Marian

12 Delumeau, Jean. Storia del paradiso: il giardino delle delizie. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994.
13 Yoshikawa, N. K. "The Virgin in the Hortus Conclusus: Healing the Body and Healing the Soul." Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality 50, no. 1 (2015): 11–32.

devotion could thus be inverted within secular literature to articulate erotic tension and social transgression.

Enclosure, therefore, functioned as both protection and constraint. As Wheeler argues, medieval gardens reflect broader cultural patterns of regulating space, thought, and behavior[14]. To enclose a garden was to impose order on nature; to enclose a body or a community was to impose order on society.

It is precisely this charged symbolic inheritance that the Cistercians would later confront. Their cloisters reconfigured enclosure away from gendered allegory and erotic symbolism, transforming the garden into a disciplined environment for silence, introspection, and communal identity — a space where healing, spirituality, and architectural austerity converged.

1.4 Theoretical Frameworks: Symbolism of space, the locus amoenus, and spatial allegory.

To understand the medieval garden fully, it must be situated within the broader theoretical traditions that shaped medieval interpretations of space. In medieval thought, space was not conceived as a neutral container but as a meaningful structure capable of conveying theological truths, moral hierarchies, and cosmological order. Architectural and landscape forms were therefore read, experienced, and interpreted symbolically. Three interrelated theoretical frameworks are particularly relevant to this thesis: the symbolism of space, the tradition of the locus amoenus, and the use of spatial allegory.

1. The Symbolism of Space

Throughout the Middle Ages, space was rarely perceived as secular or autonomous. Instead, it functioned as a medium through which divine order became intelligible in the material world. As Rossi and Rovetta have demonstrated in their analysis of ecclesiastical architecture, medieval buildings were conceived as images of the Heavenly Jerusalem, where proportion, geometry, orientation, and enclosure embodied theological principles rather than merely functional solutions[15]. Spatial order

14 Wheeler, Wendy. "11 Hortus Conclusus: The Garden of Earthly Mind." In Why Look at Plants? Leiden: Brill, 2018.
15Rossi, M., and A. Rovetta. "Indagini sullo spazio ecclesiale immagine della Gerusalemme celeste." In La dimora di Dio con gli uomini. Immagini della Gerusalemme celeste dal III al XIV secolo. Milano, 1983, 77–118.

Figure 7. Miniature in an edition of the 15th century of Le Roman de la Rose. In Vercelloni, Matteo, Virgilio Vercelloni, con la collaborazione di Paola Gallo. L'invenzione del giardino occidentale. Milano: Electa, 2003, 31.

thus became a form of symbolic language.

Within this framework, the garden occupies a privileged position. Its enclosure (conclusio), geometric clarity, and separation from the surrounding world establish it as a liminal space between nature and culture, earth and heaven. Nuvolari emphasizes that the hortus conclusus should be understood not only as a physical enclosure but as a conceptual boundary, marking a space of theological intensity and spiritual concentration[16].

The garden's ordered nature stands in contrast to the perceived chaos of the external world, reflecting the medieval belief that divine truth manifests itself through order, measure, and restraint.

In monastic contexts, this symbolism is further intensified. The cloister garden is not an ornamental adjunct but the spatial heart of the monastery, around which daily life, prayer, and movement are organized. Its centrality reinforces its role as a symbolic **axis mundi**, a stable center that mirrors the cosmic order and anchors the monastic community within a sacred spatial hierarchy.

2. The Locus Amoenus

The classical literary tradition of the locus amoenus—the "pleasant place"—provided a powerful imaginative framework for conceiving idealized natural settings. From antiquity onward, this motif described a space characterized by shade, flowing water, verdant vegetation, and sensory harmony (Fig. 7). Grimal traces its origins in Greco-Roman literature, while Küster demonstrates how its symbolic vocabulary persisted and evolved throughout medieval pastoral and religious texts[17].

In medieval culture, however, the locus amoenus underwent a significant transformation. While its classical form often evoked sensual pleasure and emotional escape, Christian reinterpretations gradually moralized and spiritualized the motif. Nuvolari argues that the medieval enclosed garden represents a critical shift: pleasure is not eliminated but disciplined, redirected toward contemplation and spiritual clarity rather than bodily delight

16 Francesco Nuvolari. Hortus conclusus; poesie di Erminia Turilli ; con testi di Flavio Manieri Milano : Mazzotta, [1986]
17 Küster, Hansjörg. History of the Garden: From the Garden of Eden to the Present Day. Translated by David Black. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.

The Cistercian cloister garden exemplifies this transformation. While it retains certain structural elements of the locus amoenus—enclosure, greenery, and a sense of calm—it deliberately suppresses excessive ornamentation, figurative imagery, and sensory abundance. Water may be present, but discreetly; vegetation is functional and symbolic rather than decorative. This produces what might be described as an **"austere locus amoenus,"** one aligned with Bernardine ideals of sobriety, humility, and inwardness.

Thus, the Cistercian garden does not reject the classical tradition outright but reformulates it according to monastic values, transforming a literary topos into a lived spatial practice.

3. Spatial Allegory

Medieval culture frequently encoded narratives, ethical systems, and cosmological models into spatial form. Allegory was not limited to texts but extended to architecture and landscape. Gardens, in particular, became sites where abstract concepts—such as virtue, salvation, and spiritual progress—could be spatially staged and experienced.

The allegorical garden of the Roman de la Rose provides a paradigmatic example: its walls, paths, and planted zones correspond to moral states and stages of desire. Helms argues that monastic cloisters similarly functioned as allegorical microcosms, where spatial order mirrored divine and cosmic structures[18]. Movement through these spaces became a form of embodied reading, in which daily circulation reinforced spiritual discipline.

Nuvolari reinforces this interpretation by describing the hortus conclusus as a "spatial text," legible through its form, limits, and internal logic.

In the cloister, the garden is not merely viewed but circumnavigated repeatedly, inscribing its symbolic meaning into the monks' bodily routines. The square or rectangular garden, often centered on a well or tree, evokes both Eden and the ordered

18 Helms, Mary W. "Sacred Landscape and the Early Medieval European Cloister. Unity, Paradise, and the Cosmic Mountain." Anthropos 97, no. 2 (2002): 435–53.

cosmos, while the surrounding arcades frame it as a space of perpetual contemplation.

This allegorical dimension allows the cloister garden to operate simultaneously on multiple levels: practical, symbolic, cosmological, and spiritual. It becomes a didactic space, shaping not only perception but behavior and identity.

Taken together, these theoretical lenses enable a nuanced understanding of how the medieval garden—and, more specifically, the Cistercian cloister garden—functioned as a site where theological, literary, cultural, and architectural discourses intersected. The symbolism of space provides the conceptual foundation; the locus amoenus offers a transformed classical inheritance; and spatial allegory explains how meaning was embedded, enacted, and sustained through form and use. Within this framework, the cloister garden emerges not as a passive backdrop to monastic life but as an active instrument of spiritual formation and symbolic communication.

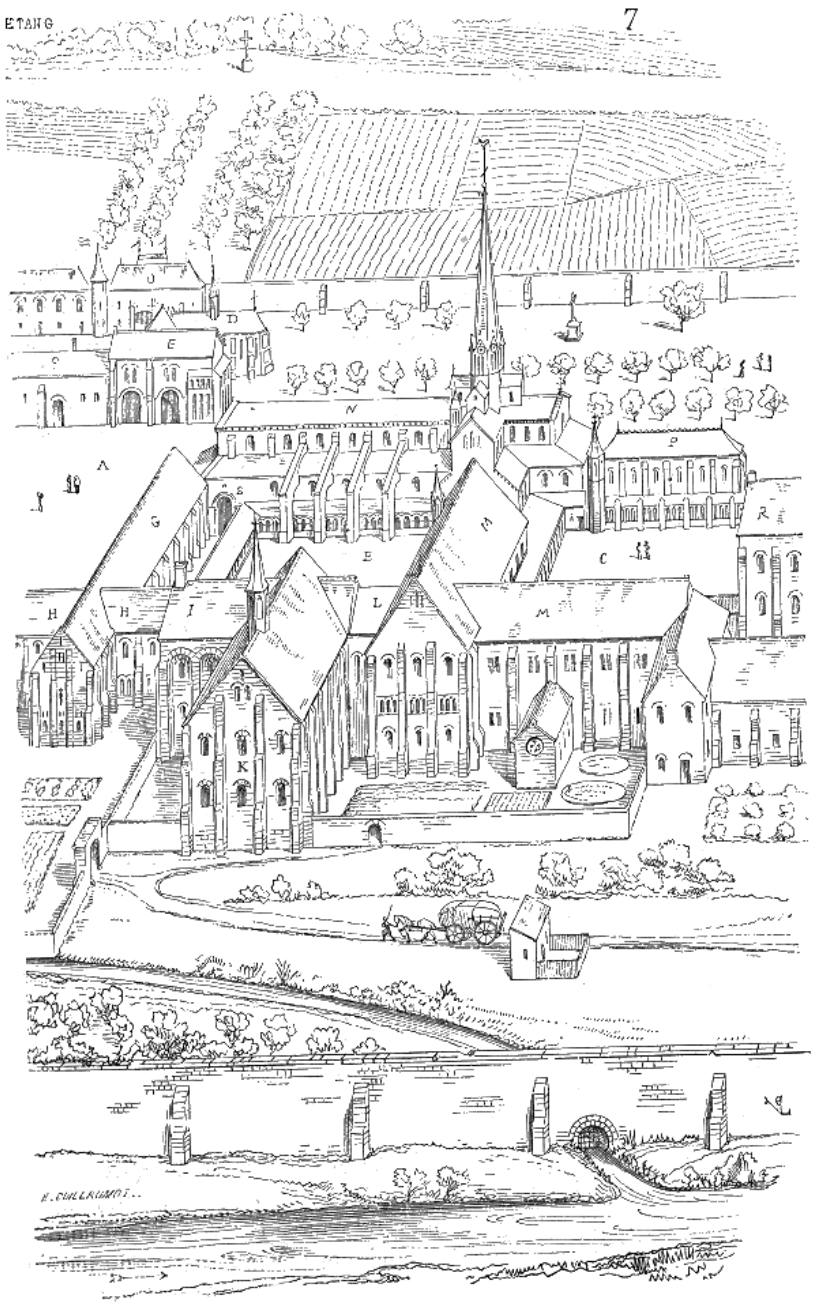

Figure 8. Plan cavalier de l'abbaye de Cîteaux. Issue from Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle, by Eugène Viollet-Le-Duc (Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

Chapter 2

Cistercian Thought and Architectural Purism

2.1 The Cistercian Reform: Historical origins, monastic ideals, and the rejection of excess.

Cistercian architecture is inseparable from the monastic reform movement that emerged at the end of the eleventh century. The Order was founded in 1098 at Cîteaux (Fig. 8) by Robert of Molesme and a small group of monks who sought to restore what they understood as the original, uncompromised spirit of the Rule of St. Benedict. Their reform was motivated by dissatisfaction with the increasing wealth, political influence, and architectural magnificence of established Benedictine and especially Cluniac monasteries, which were perceived as having drifted away from humility, manual labor, and contemplative focus.

The decision to establish the Novum Monasterium in a remote, marshy landscape was a foundational gesture of renunciation. Isolation, material deprivation, and environmental hardship were not unfortunate circumstances but integral components of the reforming program. Janauschek's Originum cisterciensium records that early Cistercian foundations endured severe poverty, internal resistance, and even hostility from surrounding communities — conditions that paradoxically strengthened their

Figure 9. San Bernardo, Correa de Vivar, Juan. (photo taken by ©Museo Nacional del Prado. Shared under a Creative Common licence)

collective identity and sense of spiritual election[1]. Withdrawal from the world was thus spatialized through geography before it was articulated architecturally.

This reform unfolded explicitly in opposition to the aesthetic regime of Cluny, whose monumental churches, sculptural programs, and luminous interiors embodied a theology that linked material splendor with heavenly glory. The Cistercians rejected this analogy outright. As François Bucher observes, Cistercian spirituality denied the continuity between the beauty of the visible world and the splendor of the afterlife, arguing instead that the ascent toward God required the progressive renunciation of sensory pleasure[2]. Architecture, therefore, could no longer function as an image of paradise but had to become an instrument of discipline and purification.

The reform was formalized through the Statuta Capitulorum Generalium Ordinis Cisterciensis, which regulated not only monastic conduct and liturgy but also architectural form. These statutes imposed strict limits on ornamentation, controlled the use of light, restricted tower construction, and emphasized enclosure, communal equality, and manual labor[3]. The monastery was conceived as a closed spiritual ecosystem in which architecture, landscape, labor, and prayer were inseparably linked. The rejection of superfluitas — excess — thus became a guiding principle that extended from economics and morality into spatial form and visual language.

2.2 Bernard of Clairvaux and the Aesthetic of Austerity

The intellectual and aesthetic consolidation of Cistercian reform is inseparable from Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) (Fig. 9), whose authority within the Order and influence across medieval Christendom were unparalleled. Bernard's Apologia ad Guillelmum abbatem stands as one of the most penetrating critiques of medieval ecclesiastical art and architecture. Written in response to Cluniac practices, the text articulates a rigorous vision of monastic space grounded in psychological, theological, and moral concerns.

In medieval thought, and particularly in the twelfth century, aesthetic theory is inseparable from broader debates on the spiritual function of art. Two opposing

1 Janauschek, L. Originum cisterciensium. Vindobonae, 1877.
2 Bucher, François. "Cistercian Architectural Purism." Comparative Studies in Society and History 3, no. 1 (1960): 89–105.
3 Statuta Capitulorum Generalium Ordinis Cisterciensis ab anno 1116 ad annuo 1786. Bibliotèque de la Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique, 9, vols. I–II. Louvain, 1933–1934.

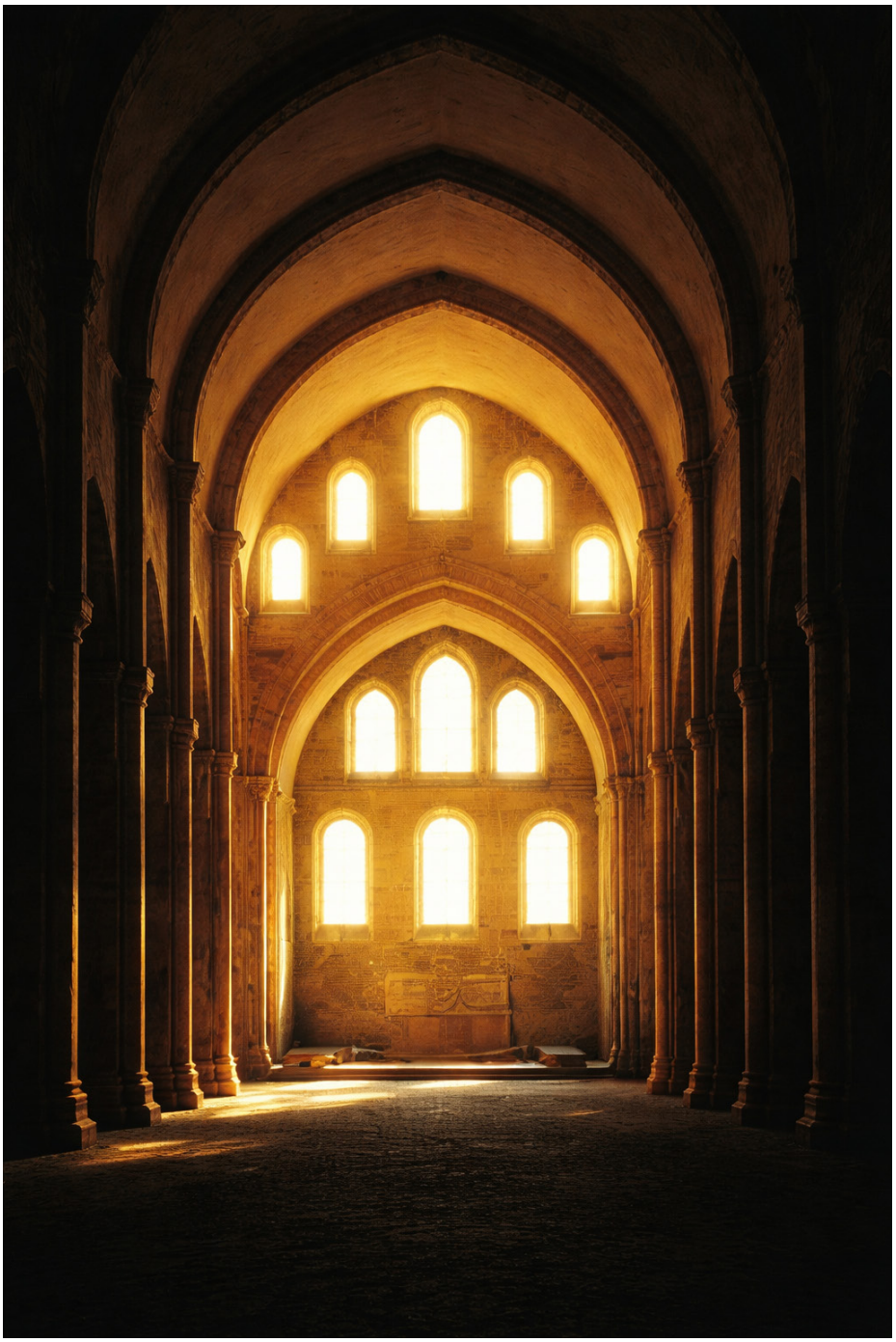

Figure 10. Fontenay Abbey, Côte-d'Or, France. (photo taken © Editions Gelbart. Shared under a Creative Common licence)

conceptions emerge with particular clarity. On the one hand, a tradition associated with Suger of Saint-Denis and the Cluniac milieu affirms the legitimacy of sensory mediation: beauty, material richness, and artistic splendor are understood as instruments capable of guiding the observer from the visible to the invisible. In this view, the sensible world becomes a vehicle through which divine realities may be apprehended.

Opposed to this position is a radically different understanding of the relationship between art, the senses, and spiritual ascent, articulated most forcefully by Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian Order. Here, the analogy between earthly beauty and divine splendor is rejected. Rather than elevating the soul, sensory excess is seen as a potential obstacle to spiritual progress. The path toward God requires a disciplined withdrawal from the senses and a reorientation toward interiority. Art, stripped of ornamental ambition, is thus assigned a limited and functional role: not to delight, but to assist the individual in recollection, self-examination, and the cultivation of inner life.

Within this framework, luxury is perceived as not merely superfluous, but actively harmful. Excessive concern for the richness of the built and decorated environment diverts resources away from charitable obligations and fosters a dangerous attachment to pleasure. The unregulated cultivation of the arts risks multiplying sensory stimuli for their own sake, encouraging enjoyment detached from spiritual purpose. Cistercian austerity, therefore, does not imply a rejection of form or space as such, but rather a deliberate ethical and spiritual redefinition of their role. This position would profoundly shape the architectural and spatial language of Cistercian monasteries, where restraint, clarity, and simplicity become instruments of spiritual discipline rather than signs of aesthetic impoverishment (Fig. 10).

Bernard famously condemns the sculptural excesses of contemporary cloisters, asking: "In claustris monachorum quid facit illa ridicula monstruositas?" ("What is this ridiculous monstrosity doing in the cloisters of monks?")[4]. His critique targets not only figural imagery but the very logic of visual distraction. Architecture that invites curiosity, wonder, or delight, he argues, fragments attention and undermines the monk's vocation to interior recollection.

Crucially, Bernard's position was not anti-artistic. Luxury in buildings was

4 San Bernardo. Apologia ad Guillelmum abbatem. In Opere di san Bernardo, edited by Ferruccio Gastaldelli, vol. I, 221–331. Milano: Città Nuova Editrice, 1984.

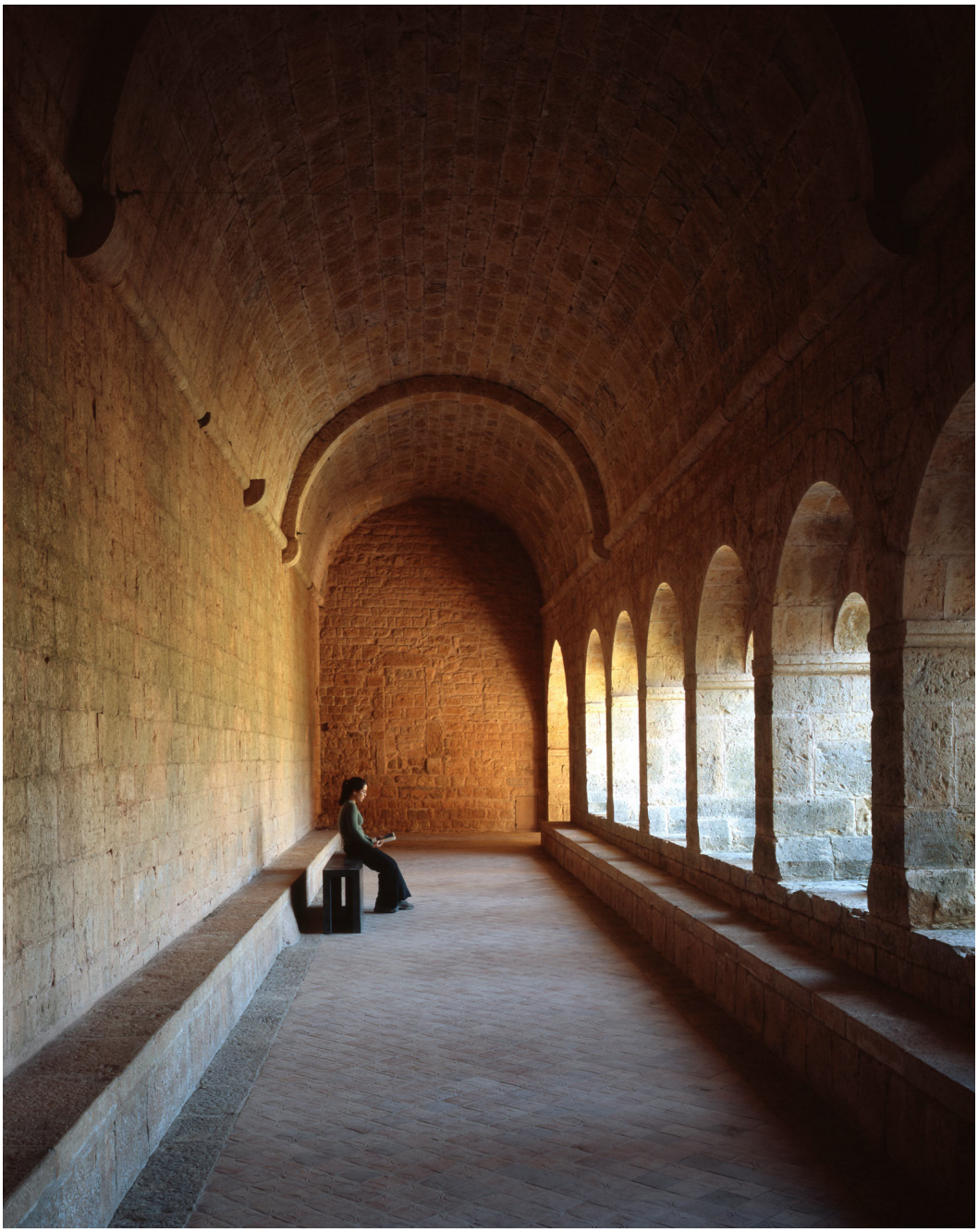

Figure 11. Le Thoronet Abbey. Leçons du Thoronet, Provence, France, 2006 (photo by Hisao Suzuki. Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

dangerous not because beauty was sinful, but because beauty detached from necessity encouraged pleasure for its own sake. Excessive cultivation of the arts multiplied stimuli without spiritual purpose, fostering vanity rather than humility. As Bernard himself suggests, and as later commentators emphasize, the absence of ornament does not entail aesthetic impoverishment. On the contrary, in a Cistercian church the purity of lines, the clarity of structure, and the harmony of proportions generate a different, more restrained form of beauty — one that does not compete with prayer but supports it (Fig. 11).

François Bucher famously defined this position as Cistercian "architectural purism": a deliberate and systematic reduction of form to essentials in order to serve spiritual and communal life[5]. Bernard's influence was not confined to theory. Through figures such as Achard of Clairvaux, his principles were translated into built form, producing model churches whose architectural neutrality embodied the reform's ideals. Although Bernard never explicitly described cloister gardens, his insistence on silence, order, and restraint implicitly shaped their character, ensuring that these spaces, too, were stripped of narrative imagery and sensual excess.

2.3 The Cistercian Philosophy of Nature and Space: Simplicity, functionality, and the sacred

The Cistercian approach to architecture and landscape reflects a coherent philosophy of space rooted in spiritual discipline. Unlike monastic traditions that embraced iconographic density or ornamental richness, the Cistercians conceived architecture as an instrument of inner transformation. Space itself became a theological medium. As Pressouyre argues, Cistercian architecture communicates divine simplicity through pure form, allowing meaning to emerge from proportion, rhythm, and order rather than representational imagery[6].

This spatial logic resonates strongly with Augustinian principles of similarity, equality, and integration of parts. Cistercian buildings were conceived as unified systems in which every element served both functional clarity and spiritual focus. Proportional schemes were often derived from square-based modules, frequently determined by the width of the crossing, which governed the dimensions of nave, aisles, and elevations.

5 Bucher, François. "Cistercian Architectural Purism." Comparative Studies in Society and History 3, no. 1 (1960): 89–105.
6 Pressouyre, Léon. "St. Bernard to St. Francis: Monastic Ideals and Iconographic Programs in the Cloister." Gesta12, no. 1/2 (1973): 71–92.

Figure 12. Léoncel Abbey, Drome, France. (photo taken ©Photos-Dauphiné. Shared under a Creative Common licence)

Such geometric discipline ensured legibility, coherence, and rationality. Cistercian architecture does not appeal to the senses through spectacle; it addresses reason through measure.

Light, too, was treated with restraint. As Maximilian Sternberg notes, natural illumination in Cistercian churches was carefully calibrated — sufficient for use but devoid of theatrical contrast or symbolic excess. Light became an ambient condition rather than a dramatic device, reinforcing the monastery's role as an officina, a workshop for the art of holiness. Architecture thus framed daily monastic practice as labor — spiritual, physical, and intellectual.

Nature was not excluded from this system but rigorously disciplined. Cistercian abbeys were typically founded in marginal landscapes — marshes, valleys, forests — emphasizing withdrawal from worldly life (Fig. 12). Yet these landscapes were systematically transformed through drainage, water management, and cultivation. Romanini's analysis of the città quadrata demonstrates how geometric order was imposed not only on buildings but on territory itself, aligning human labor with divine rationality[7]. The cloister garden, positioned at the heart of the monastic complex, condensed this worldview into a spatial microcosm: enclosed, regulated, silent, and ritually traversed.

2.4 Architecture of Restraint: Materiality, proportion, spatial hierarchy, and territorial order

Cistercian architectural expression is defined by restraint in materiality, precision in proportion, and clarity in spatial hierarchy. Buildings were typically constructed from local stone, left exposed and undecorated, emphasizing material honesty and regional specificity. Elevations were kept low and horizontal, with one-storey compositions that avoided monumentality. Structural systems were reduced to their essentials: transverse barrel vaults acted as built-in buttresses, eliminating the need for elaborate external articulation. As Hahn emphasizes, refinement was achieved through tectonic logic rather than decorative complexity[8].

Proportion played a central role in this architectural language. The height of

7 Romanini, A.M. "La città quadrata. Il progetto edilizio di san Bernardo." In Ratio fecit diversum. San Bernardo e le arti. Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Roma 1991, Roma, 1995.
8 Hahn, Hanno. Die Frühe Kirchenbaukunst der Zisterzienser. Berlin: Mann, 1957.

Figure 13. Le Thoronet Abbey. Leçons du Thoronet, Provence, France, 2006 (photo by Hisao Suzuki. Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

the main vault was often twice the width of the nave, allowing the entire elevation to be inscribed within a perfect square — a form deliberately devoid of dramatic tension. This geometry produced a clear spatial hierarchy — crossing, nave, aisles — while maintaining overall unity. Cesare Brandi famously observed that Cistercian architecture offers nothing that is not immediately within reach of understanding: no ornament, no painting, only tectonic structures that reveal themselves for what they are[9]. Architecture thus becomes an ethical act of clarity.

Exemplary abbeys such as Fontenay and Le Thoronet (Fig. 13) embody these principles with particular intensity. Their unadorned surfaces, harmonic proportions, and restrained light produce spaces of profound stillness. The enduring relevance of these buildings is underscored by Lucien Hervé's photographic study of Le Thoronet, introduced by Le Corbusier, who admired the abbey's proportional harmony and structural clarity as timeless architectural values. For modern architects, Cistercian architecture appeared as a premodern articulation of principles later associated with modernism: functionalism, material truth, and spatial coherence.

Recent scholarship has further expanded the understanding of Cistercian spatial organization by emphasizing its operation across multiple nested scales. First, the Order structured a vast territorial network radiating from Cîteaux across Europe. Second, each abbey governed a domain comprising the monastery proper and its dependent granges. Third, individual landscape units — farms, mills, fisheries, workshops — were organized according to local geography, demographics, and economic needs. Proportion, therefore, was not rigidly fixed but adaptive, responding to environmental conditions and productive requirements.

Materiality, understood broadly, constituted the tangible heritage of this spatial system. Abbey buildings, industrial infrastructures, and transformed landscapes together formed a coherent fabric of historical and cultural value.

9 Brandi, C. "Lettura dell'architettura cistercense." In I Cistercensi e il Lazio…, 1–9.

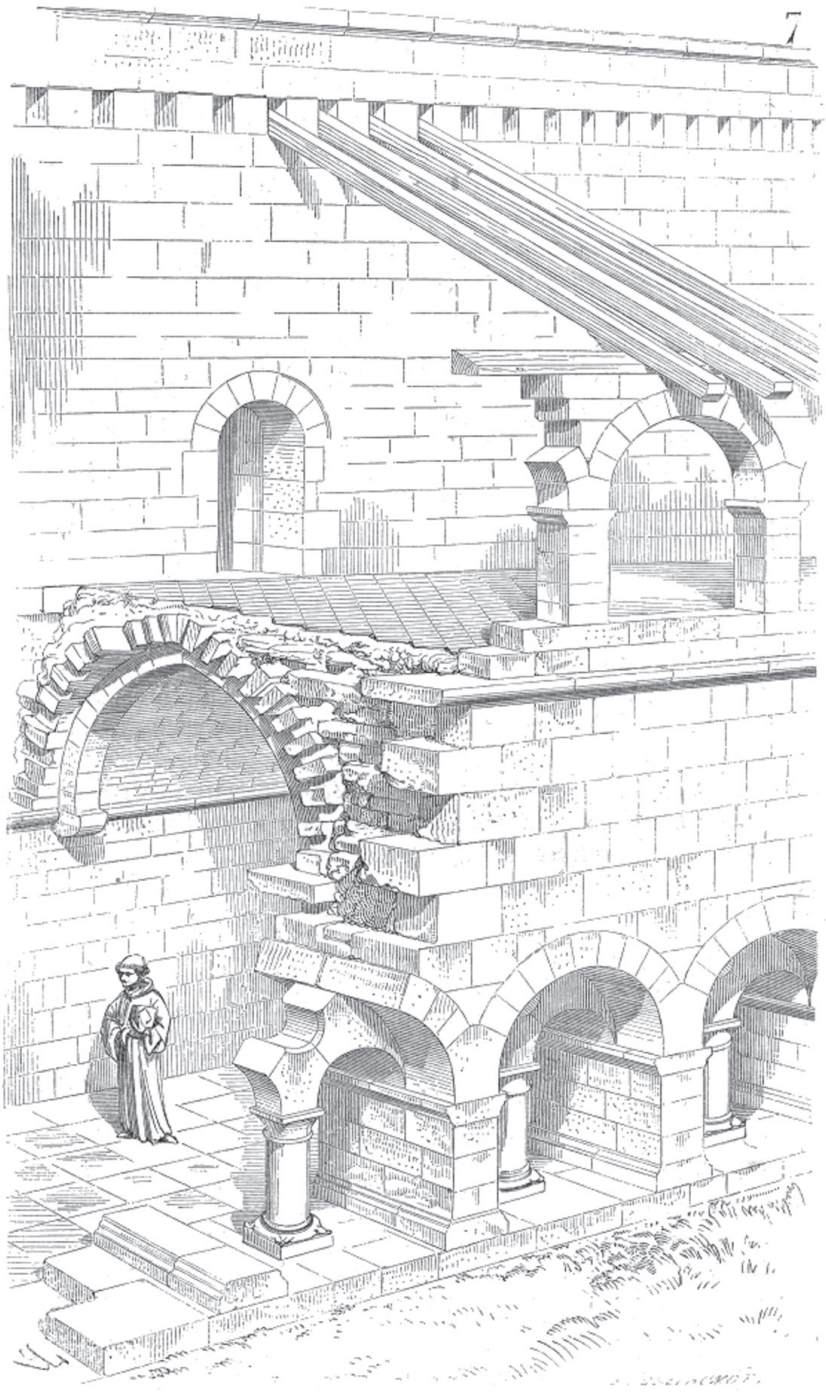

Figure 14. Le Thoronet Abbey. Provence, France, 2006 (Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

Chapter 3

The Cistercian Cloister Garden: Spatial Practice and Symbolic Form

3.1 The Cloister as Hortus Conclusus: Architectural and symbolic readings.

Within the monastic complex, the cloister occupies a privileged position as both a spatial hinge and a symbolic core. In the Cistercian context, the cloister garden represents one of the most refined syntheses of medieval symbolic thought and architectural discipline. As an architectural void structured by surrounding galleries (Fig. 14) and as a cultivated fragment of nature, the cloister functions as a hortus conclusus—not in the richly allegorical or Marian sense typical of Gothic imagery, but rather as a purified and abstracted enclosure shaped by restraint, silence, and renunciation.

Early historiography has emphasized the cloister's inheritance from classical and early medieval models. Horn's foundational study distinguishes the medieval cloister from Roman peristyles and Carolingian courtyards, arguing that the cloister reconfigures these antecedents through Christian cosmology and Edenic symbolism[1]. The cloister garden thus becomes a microcosmic image of Paradise regained—not as a sensorially rich garden of delights, but as a space ordered by discipline and spiritual

1 Horn, Walter. "On the Origins of the Medieval Cloister." Gesta 12, no. 1/2 (1973): 13–52.

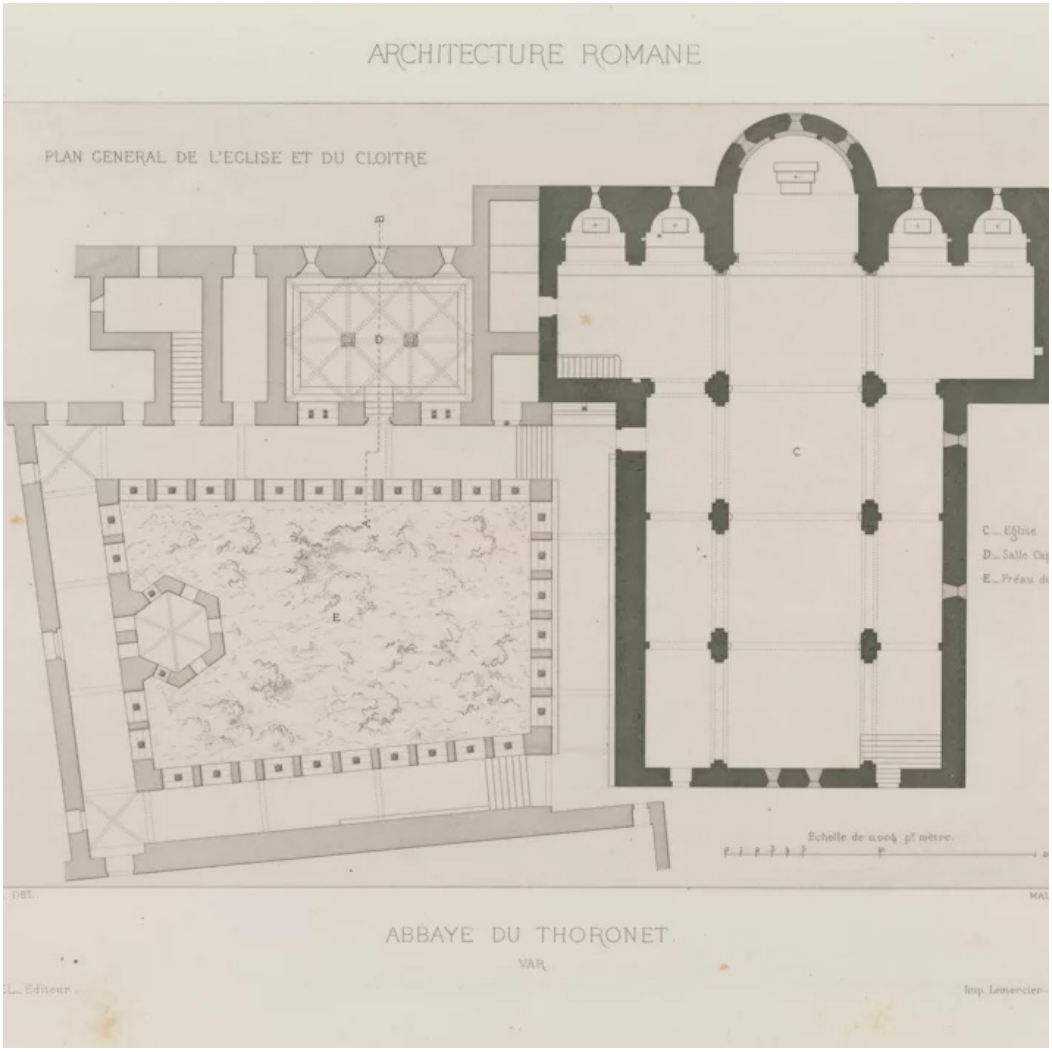

Figure 15. Architecture romane. Abbaye du Thoronet. Plan général de l'église et du cloître © Reproduction Benjamin Gavaudo / CMN

aspiration.

Meyvaert further develops this interpretation by framing the claustrum as a symbolic enclosure that embodies monastic rebirth and separation from the secular world[2]. The act of enclosure itself is central: the garden is not meant to be visually consumed but spiritually inhabited. For the monk, entering the cloister is a daily reenactment of withdrawal, an architectural reinforcement of the vow of stability.

In Cistercian monasteries, this inherited symbolic framework undergoes a radical transformation. In deliberate opposition to Cluniac excess and narrative richness, Cistercian cloisters systematically avoided figural decoration and iconographic programs. As Pressouyre emphasizes, the Order replaced visual didacticism with geometric clarity and spatial legibility[3]. The cloister garden becomes a negative image of the courtly garden: an enclosed space emptied of representational imagery, where absence itself acquires symbolic force.

In this sense, the Cistercian hortus conclusus is not a garden that speaks through symbols, but one that disciplines perception. It does not instruct through images but through spatial order, proportion, and controlled emptiness. The enclosure no longer signifies possession or purity through imagery; instead, it becomes a spatial condition that structures monastic life and interior contemplation.

3.2 Typology and Design: Layouts, Proportions, and the Use of Water, Plants, and Voids

Cistercian artistic expression deliberately renounces sensory appeal in favor of intellectual clarity. Rather than engaging the emotions through visual richness or ornament, it addresses reason through the legibility, proportionality, and simplicity of geometric relationships. Meaning is not produced by decorative excess, but by the intelligibility of spatial order itself.

Within this framework, the architectural innovation commonly known as the Bernardine plan represents a decisive moment in medieval monastic design (Fig. 15). Codified under the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux, this spatial model conceives architecture as a system of pure, rational relationships. Space is distributed with

2 Meyvaert, Paul. "The Medieval Monastic Claustrum." Gesta 12, no. 1/2 (1973): 53–59.
3 Pressouyre, Léon. "St. Bernard to St. Francis: Monastic Ideals and Iconographic Programs in the Cloister." Gesta12, no. 1/2 (1973): 71–92.

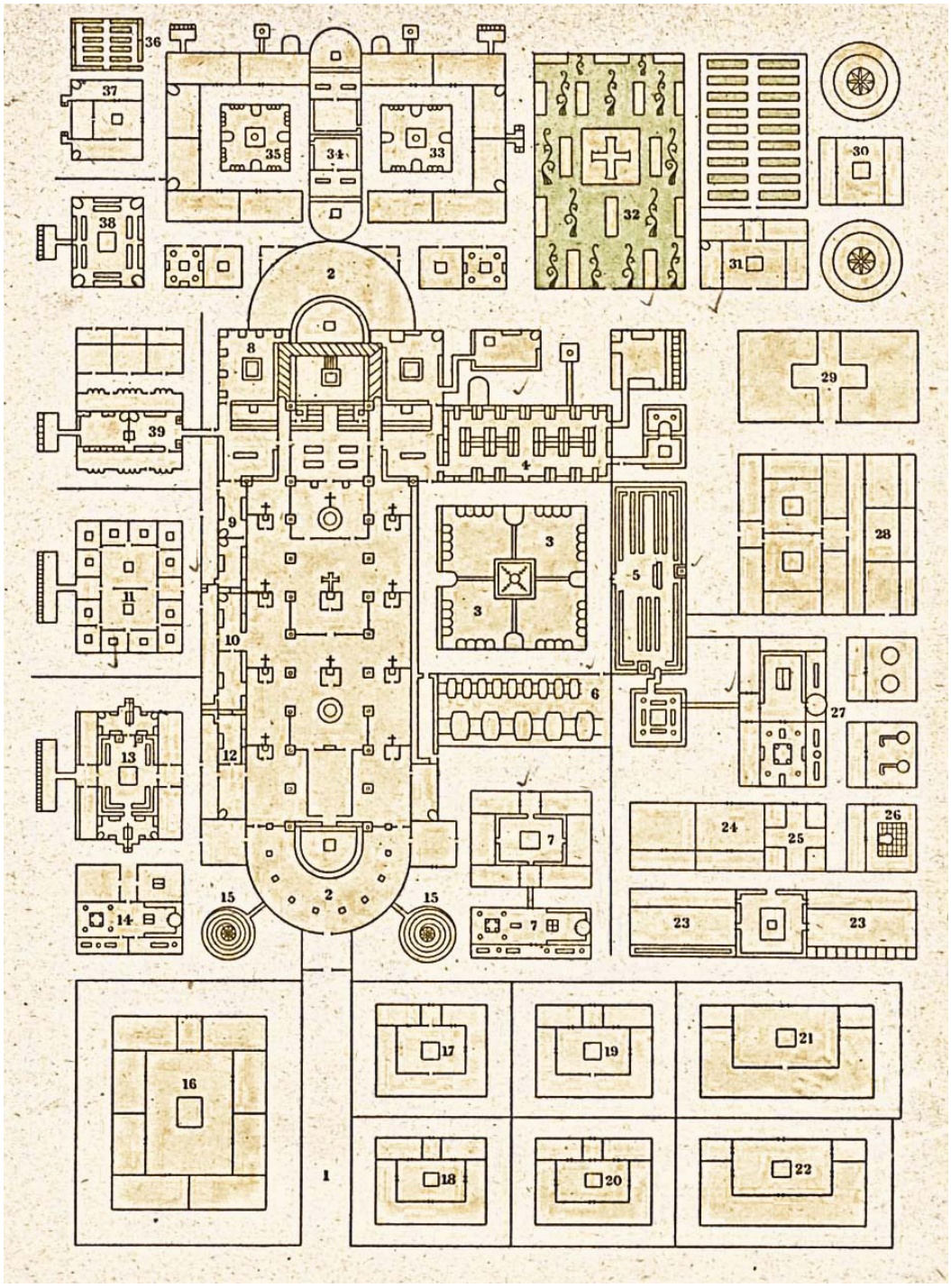

Figure 16. Ground plan, St. Gall monastery, Switzerland. Scanned from Vol. 1, 9th edition of an EB (1875); initial upload to en.wikipedia by Malcolm Farmer.

crystalline clarity and governed by principles analogous to those of solid geometry, resulting in environments that are coherent, readable, and free from ambiguity. Such architecture does not seek to impress, but to instruct: by ordering space according to rational and measurable principles, it becomes an instrument for spiritual discipline and contemplative focus.

The architectural form of the Cistercian cloister is remarkably consistent across regions, reflecting the Order's emphasis on uniformity, regulation, and spiritual equality. Typically organized around a square or near-square plan, the cloister consists of four covered galleries enclosing a central open garden. This geometry is not accidental: it expresses a belief in divine order and rational harmony. It is reinforced by the Statuta of the Order (fig. 9), which sought to prevent regional or artistic excess.

Geometric Regularity

The spatial organization of Cistercian monasteries from the twelfth to the early fourteenth century is governed by a rigorous geometric logic. Their planimetric layouts are structured through ad quadratum subdivisions (Fig. 16), generating proportional relationships that extend coherently from the ground plan to the elevation. This proportional discipline is not confined to the abbey church alone, but informs all spaces associated with monastic life, reinforcing the unity of the architectural organism.

Each architectural component may therefore be understood as an "intellectual space," articulated through strict geometric forms. As noted by Romanini, these spaces resemble a compact block surmounted by a triangular cusp, multiplied through processes of juxtaposition and vertical superimposition. Architecture is conceived as a system of modular, rational units, assembled into a coherent whole rather than as a sequence of expressive or decorative gestures.

Although this architectural language is founded upon shared principles—closely tied to Cistercian ideals of spirituality, poverty, and rational order, and shaped by the lucid ratio attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux—it is not entirely uniform. As Cistercian architecture spread across Europe, this disciplined spatial model absorbed regional inflections, adapting to local materials, construction techniques, and building traditions. The result is a dialectical tension between universal order and local specificity, in which a common geometric and spiritual framework is articulated through diverse territorial expressions.

The square plan of the cloister garden establishes a condition of balance and centripetal calm. In some cases, the garden is divided into quadrants by simple paths

Figure 17. Le Thoronet Abbey. Provence, France. (photo by Hisao Suzuki. Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

or water channels; in others, it remains an uninterrupted grassy surface (fig. 10). Ornamented flowerbeds and elaborate planting schemes were discouraged. As Aben and De Wit observe, this restrained approach distinguishes the Cistercian cloister from later Renaissance enclosed gardens, where geometry serves visual pleasure and display[4]. In the Cistercian case, geometry functions instead as an instrument of spiritual clarity.

Water as a Purified Element

Water occupies a carefully controlled role within the cloister garden. Frequently present in the form of a central fountain or basin, it served practical functions related to monastic hygiene and ritual washing, but also carried symbolic weight. Helms has shown that water in monastic gardens evokes early Christian cosmology, particularly the symbolism of the fons vitae and the cosmic mountain from which the rivers of Paradise flow[5]. In Cistercian cloisters, however, this symbolism is stripped of narrative elaboration: water is present, audible and visible, but never theatrically emphasized.

Vegetation: Minimal and Disciplined

Vegetation in the Cistercian cloister garden is markedly restrained. Instead of ornamental flowers rich in allegorical meaning, the garden often featured grass, medicinal herbs, or low shrubs (Fig. 17). This choice reflects both practical concerns and a spiritual ethic. Wheeler interprets this minimal planting as part of an "ethic of attention," in which nature is not suppressed but disciplined, allowing monks to engage with creation without sensory distraction[6].

The Void as Design Principle

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Cistercian cloister garden is its emptiness. Rather than a lack, this void constitutes a deliberate architectural and symbolic strategy. Rudolph describes the cloister void as a "public expression of monastic isolation," an architectural manifestation of withdrawal that is nonetheless

4 Aben, R., and S. De Wit. The Enclosed Garden: History and Development of the Hortus Conclusus and Its Reintroduction into the Present-Day Urban Landscape. 010 Publishers, 1999.
5 Helms, Mary W. "Sacred Landscape and the Early Medieval European Cloister. Unity, Paradise, and the Cosmic Mountain." Anthropos 97, no. 2 (2002): 435–53.
6 Wheeler, Wendy. "11 Hortus Conclusus: The Garden of Earthly Mind." In Why Look at Plants? Leiden: Brill, 2018.

Figure 18. "Église : en premier plan, le collatéral sud ; au fond, le collatéral nord [Abbaye du Thoronet (Var)]" © Lucien Hervé / Dist. Centre des monuments nationaux

shared communally[7] (Rudolph, 2019). The absence of visual stimuli transforms the garden into a space of projection, where contemplation replaces observation.

3.3 The Experience of the Cloister: Movement, Light, and Sensory Perception in Monastic Life

Beyond its symbolic and typological dimensions, the cloister garden must be understood as a lived space, continuously activated by monastic routines. Daily processions, readings, moments of silent meditation, and informal encounters unfolded in and around the cloister, giving it a profound experiential dimension.

Movement and Rhythm

The cloister ambulatory functions as a path of slow, repetitive movement. The regular spacing of columns and arches establishes a rhythmic cadence that structures bodily motion. This architectural rhythm reinforces the temporal discipline of monastic life, aligning physical movement with spiritual practice. As Brandi observes, the cloister's repetition produces a form of "visual asceticism," where architecture mirrors the internal discipline of the monk[8].

Light as Spiritual Medium

Light plays a central role in shaping the cloister experience. Unlike Gothic churches, where light is often dramatized, Cistercian architecture favors modulation and diffusion (Fig. 18). Hahn notes that light entering the cloister is filtered through arcades and reflected off pale stone surfaces, producing a uniform luminosity that avoids sharp contrasts[9]. The garden thus becomes a luminous void, surrounded by shaded galleries—a spatial metaphor for divine illumination emerging from simplicity.

Sound, Silence, and Sensory Reduction

The cloister garden amplifies silence rather than negating sound. Subtle auditory elements—footsteps on stone, flowing water, rustling leaves—become perceptible

7 Rudolph, Conrad. "Medieval Architectural Theory, the Sacred Economy, and the Public Presentation of Monastic Architecture: The Classic Cistercian Plan." Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 78, no. 3 (2019): 259–75.
8 Brandi, C. "Lettura dell'architettura cistercense." In I Cistercensi e il Lazio…, 1–9.
9 Hahn, Hanno. Die Frühe Kirchenbaukunst der Zisterzienser. Berlin: Mann, 1957.

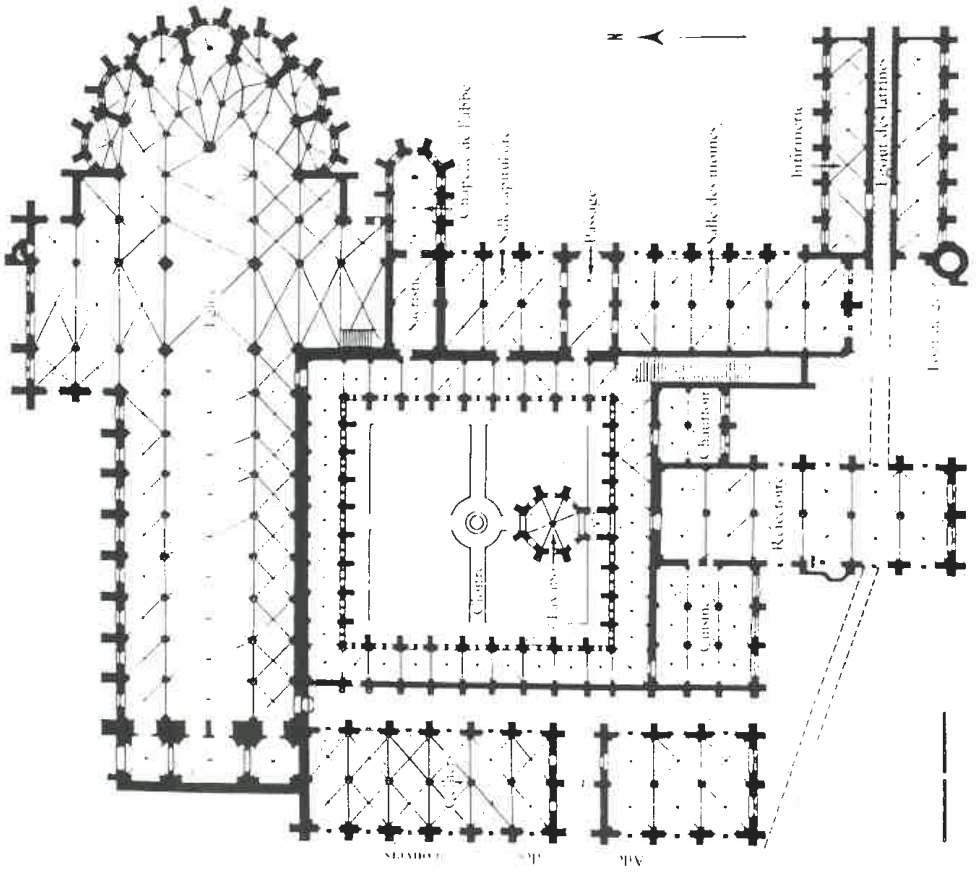

Figure 19. Royaumont. *In* Viti, Goffredo, ed. Architettura cistercense: Fontenay e le abbazie in Italia dal 1120 al 1160. Casamari: Edizioni Casamari; Firenze: Certosa di Firenze, 1995. 35

precisely because of the absence of noise. This sensory reduction fosters recollection and attentiveness. Ledford characterizes this condition as a form of "proto-minimalism," anticipating modern architectural concerns with sensory control and perception.

Temporal and Seasonal Experience

The cloister also operates as a temporal instrument. Its appearance and atmosphere shift with the hours of the Divine Office, the changing seasons, and the liturgical calendar. Light angles, temperature, vegetation, and shadow patterns evolve continuously, reinforcing the monastic conception of time as cyclical and sacred rather than linear.

3.4 Comparative Analysis: Cistercian Abbeys and precedent monastic experiences.

Comparative analysis of Cistercian abbey plans in relation to earlier monastic layouts reveals a radical reconfiguration of conventual space. This difference was so pronounced that scholars, already in the nineteenth century, identified the existence of a distinct "Cistercian plan," characterized by a heightened rationality and consistency in spatial distribution. This model spread widely across Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Fig. 19), accompanying the rapid expansion of the Order.

Subsequent scholarship refined this notion. From the early studies of Esser and Eyoux in the 1950s, research progressively shifted from the idea of a generic and timeless "Cistercian essence" toward the more precise concept of the bernardinischer Grundtypus. As Romanini has emphasized, this shift anchored interpretation in measurable architectural data, giving rise to several decades of focused studies on individual abbeys and regional contexts. A decisive outcome of this historiographical process was the recognition that the bernardinischer Grundtypus cannot be reduced to the plan of the abbey church alone. Rather, it constitutes the comprehensive design of the monastery as an integrated organism.

The Cistercian abbey emerges, in this perspective, as a form of agrarian city: not an abstract ideal, but a manifesto settlement that proposes an alternative spatial and social model. Monastic buildings and productive structures are conceived as an organic unity, governed by a modular planning method of exceptional simplicity and clarity. Fixed proportional relationships regulate not only plans and elevations according to ad quadratum principles, but also architectural details, sculptural forms, pavements, glazing, manuscript production, and even the temporal rhythm of liturgical practice.

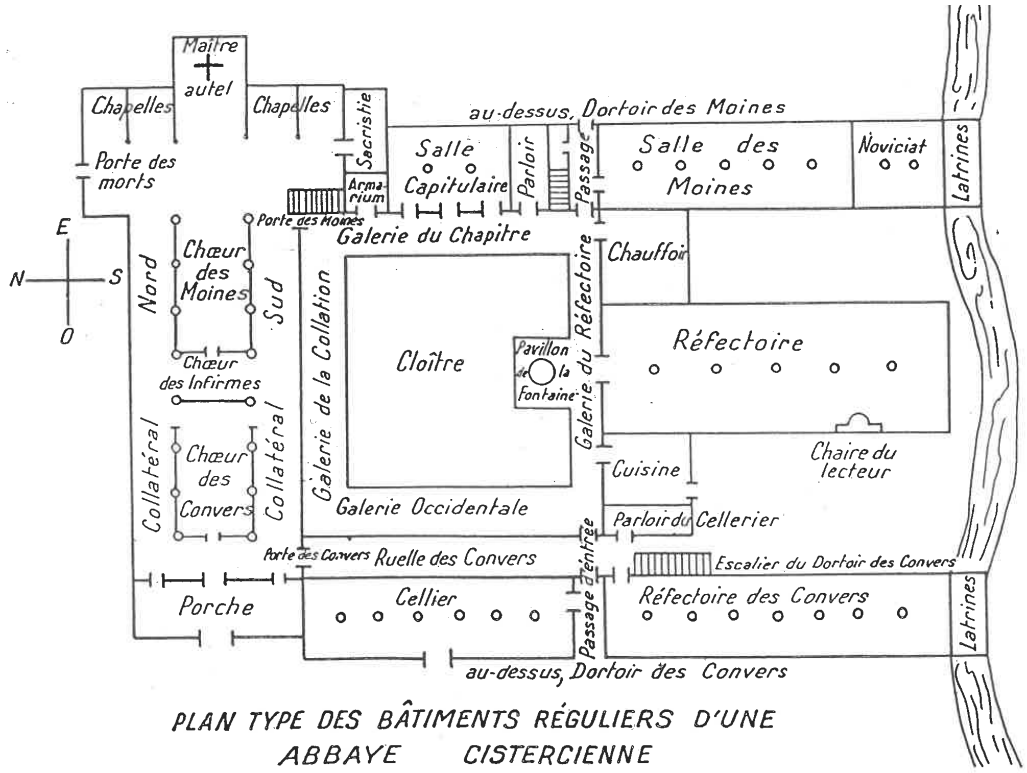

Figure 20. Tipological Plan by Aubert. *In* Viti, Goffredo, ed. Architettura cistercense: Fontenay e le abbazie in Italia dal 1120 al 1160. Casamari: Edizioni Casamari; Firenze: Certosa di Firenze, 1995. 37

The widespread and consistent application of this architectural project suggests a direct involvement of the Cistercians in the construction of their abbeys. Contemporary sources attest to the existence of monastic building-site schools and to the active participation of monks in construction, hydraulic engineering, and land management. Bernard of Clairvaux's own testimony concerning his brother Gerard, as well as accounts by William of Saint-Thierry and Orderic Vitalis, confirm that building was understood as a form of spiritual and communal labor integral to monastic life.

Modern attempts to codify this system through a "typical Cistercian plan" reflect both the coherence and the variability of the model. While scholars such as Aubert (Fig. 20), Dimier, Braunfels, Hervay (Fig. 12) and others have proposed schematic reconstructions, none can be regarded as definitive. The absence of scale and the diversity of functional arrangements across sites underscore that the Cistercian plan is best understood not as a fixed diagram, but as a flexible framework: a rational and spiritual order capable of adaptation while remaining faithful to its underlying principles.

A comparative reading makes evident the radical specificity of the Cistercian cloister garden within the broader medieval tradition of enclosed gardens. When set against Benedictine and, above all, Cluniac cloisters, the Cistercian model reveals a deliberate process of subtraction rather than embellishment. Figural decoration is almost entirely absent, replaced by a strict geometric order that disciplines both space and perception. This geometric control is not merely formal, but ethical and spiritual: it reinforces silence, reduces sensory distraction, and aligns the garden with the ascetic ideals articulated in Cistercian reform texts. Planting is kept to a minimum and remains primarily functional, often limited to grass, simple medicinal species, or symbolic trees without overt iconographic charge. Most significantly, the cloister garden is not conceived as an autonomous or contemplative object, but as a space fully integrated into the daily rhythms of monastic life—circumambulated during processions, crossed in silence, and constantly present as a visual and spatial horizon for prayer, work, and reading.

The contrast becomes even sharper when the Cistercian cloister is compared to secular medieval gardens. Unlike aristocratic or courtly horti, which functioned as spaces of representation, sociability, and symbolic display, the Cistercian enclosure systematically excludes erotic or courtly references, allegorical programs, and emblematic or heraldic flora. There is no intention to communicate status, lineage, or cultivated leisure. The garden does not serve performative or social functions, nor does it invite staged encounters or narrative readings. Instead, it resists legibility as an image and withdraws from the visual economy of medieval garden culture, positioning itself as an anti-spectacle within the monastic compound.

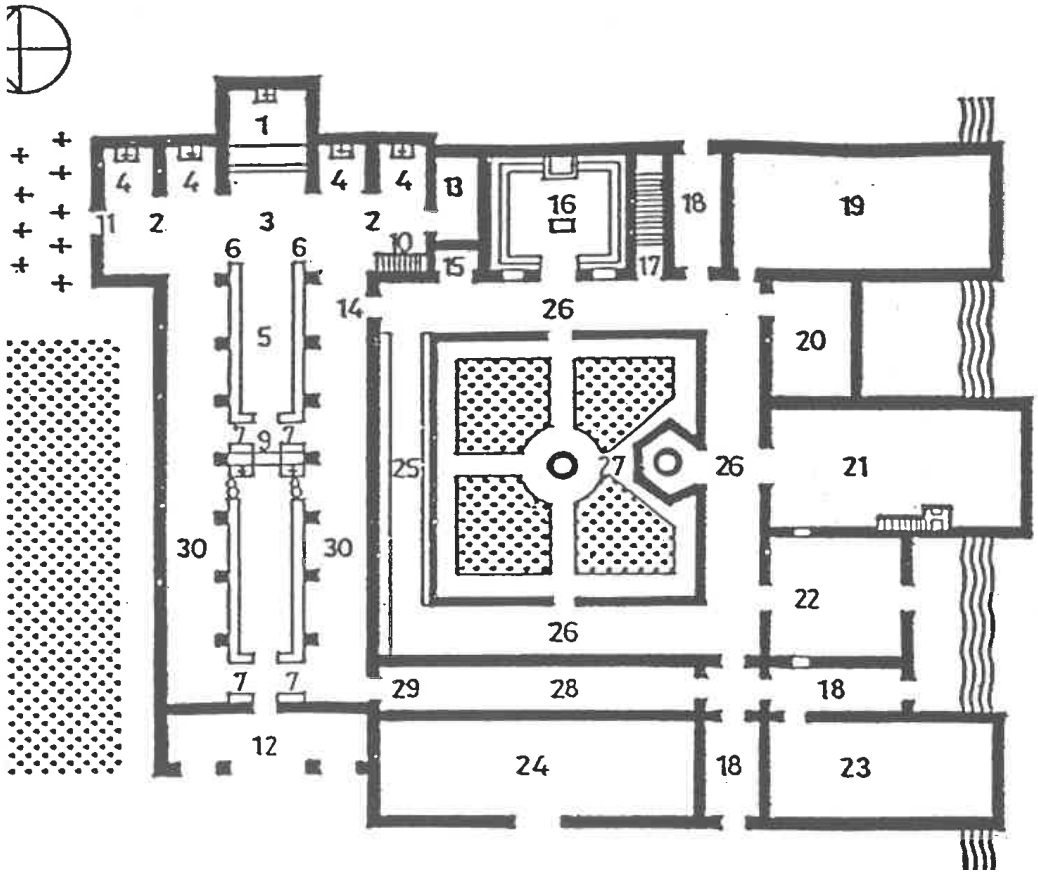

Figure 21. Tipological Plan by Hervay. *In* Viti, Goffredo, ed. Architettura cistercense: Fontenay e le abbazie in Italia dal 1120 al 1160. Casamari: Edizioni Casamari; Firenze: Certosa di Firenze, 1995. 40

A similar distance can be observed in relation to Marian hortus conclusus imagery, which was widespread in late medieval visual and literary culture. The Cistercian cloister deliberately avoids Marian iconographic markers such as roses, lilies, enclosed fountains, or doves—elements traditionally associated with purity, incarnation, and divine fecundity. It also rejects narrative or metaphorical constructions that equate enclosure with the feminine body or with allegories of virginal containment. In doing so, the cloister distances itself from a symbolic system based on visual analogy and representational density, even when such imagery was theologically orthodox and widely accepted.

What emerges from these comparisons is a radically purified form of enclosure. The Cistercian cloister garden functions less as a symbol to be read than as a spatial discipline to be inhabited. Its meaning is not produced through iconography or allegory imposed upon the space, but through absence, repetition, and use. As an architectural void, it structures silence, regulates movement, and anchors monastic time, allowing spiritual significance to arise from lived practice rather than visual representation. In this sense, the Cistercian cloister garden embodies a distinctive medieval understanding of space in which restraint itself becomes the primary vehicle of meaning.

Figure 22. Main Facade of Santa Maria di Chiaravalle della Colomba. Photograph by the author, digitally modified, 2026.

Chapter 4

Case Study: The Abbey of Santa Maria di Chiaravalle della Colomba

4.1 Methodological Selection

Bernard of Clairvaux: Key Spatial Concepts

(Textual Axes)

A. Paupertas formalis (Formal poverty)

Rejection of ornament, images, sensory excess

(Apologia, §§12–29)

B. Mensura (Measure and proportion)

Architecture as moral discipline

(Sermones in Cantica, esp. Sermons 23–25)

C. Silentium (Silence and recollection)

Space as instrument of interiority

(Epist. 106; Sermon 74)

D. Separatio (Enclosure and withdrawal)

True enclosure is spiritual before physical

Figure 23. Interior view of the cloister. Photograph by the author, digitally modified, 2026.

(Apologia, §20)

E. Interior hortus (Inner garden)

The garden as soul, not spectacle

(Sermones in Cantica, Sermon 11; 46)

Bernard of Clairvaux does not prescribe gardens; he prescribes conditions of perception. The Italian cloisters examined show that the more materially absent the garden becomes, the closer the space aligns with Bernardine theology.

The Abbey of Santa Maria di Chiaravalle della Colomba is selected as the primary case study for this thesis because it presents a rare convergence of Cistercian formal coherence, relative architectural integrity, and interpretative ambiguity. Unlike urban or heavily musealised monasteries, Chiaravalle della Colomba remains situated in a rural landscape that preserves the original logic of Cistercian withdrawal, while at the same time bearing the marks of restoration, reuse, and symbolic reinterpretation.

Methodologically, the abbey offers an ideal terrain for examining the hortus conclusus not as a reconstructed medieval image, but as a spatial and symbolic condition shaped by measure, enclosure, and silence, in close dialogue with Bernard of Clairvaux's textual thought.

4.2 Historical Context and Architectural Features of the Site

The foundation of the Abbey of Santa Maria della Colomba is situated within a complex historiographical framework, in which the precise date of origin has long been debated by scholars. Proposed dates range between 1132, 1135, and 1136, depending on differing interpretations of documentary sources and early modern scholarly accounts. In particular, a seventeenth-century interpretation of the earliest surviving charter suggested that the document represented a donation to an already established monastic community, thus anticipating the foundation to 1132, the year in which Emperor Lothair II is believed to have met Bernard of Clairvaux near Piacenza, at Roncaglia, granting imperial approval for the new foundation.

More recent scholarship has substantially revised this hypothesis. Corvi and Spinelli argue that Bernard's presence in Piacenza is not documented prior to 1135 and that the arrival of the monks should be placed between the winter of 1135 and 1136. This interpretation is supported by two documents dated to April of the following year, which explicitly refer to a monastery "Columba nominatur." In these documents, the bishop of Piacenza grants the monastery the tithes of the surrounding lands—an essential economic provision without which a monastic community could not be sustained. In

Figure 24. Interior view of the cloister. Photograph by the author, digitally modified, 2026.

the same period, the marquises Uberto Pallavicino and Corrado Cavalcabò donated additional lands, enabling the territorial and economic consolidation of the new settlement.

The name "Colomba" has traditionally been explained through a foundation legend, according to which a dove marked the site of the monastery by dropping straws onto the ground. A more plausible interpretation, however, proposed by Corvi and Spinelli, relates the toponym to the symbolic value of the dove as an emblem of the Holy Spirit, consistent with the theological and symbolic language characteristic of Cistercian spirituality.

A papal privilege issued in 1137 and addressed to Bernard of Clairvaux confirms Pope Innocent II's approval of the new monastic community. This document does not imply that Bernard served as abbot of the Colomba; rather, it indicates his role as temporary overseer of the foundation, pending the election of the first abbot. That role was assumed by Giovanni, a French monk from Clairvaux, as were all members of the initial community. The rapid material and spiritual growth of the abbey is evidenced by the fact that, as early as 1142, the bishop of Parma invited Abbot Giovanni to found a new monastery within his diocese, later known as Fontevivo.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Santa Maria della Colomba emerged as a significant center of Cistercian expansion in northern Italy. Several dependent houses were established, including female monasteries and new foundations such as Fontevivo, Quartazzola (1217, in the diocese of Piacenza), Brondolo (1229, in the diocese of Chioggia), Santa Maria in Strada (1250, in the diocese of Bologna), and Valserena (1298, in the diocese of Parma). This period of growth was accompanied by numerous papal privileges aimed at placing the abbey under apostolic protection, safeguarding its properties, and consolidating its institutional autonomy.

The prosperity of the monastery was first disrupted in 1214, when it was plundered during the invasion of the Piacenza territory by the armies of Parma, Cremona, and Reggio. Far more devastating, however, was the destruction of 1248, carried out by the army of Emperor Frederick II in the context of political retaliation following his defeat near Parma. As a result of this event, only the church, the chapter house, and the cloister survived, forming the core of the medieval complex that remains identifiable today. This destruction occurred despite the monks' attempt to seek protection from the emperor himself.

From the fifteenth century onward, the history of the abbey reflects the broader institutional transformations experienced by many monastic establishments in Italy. In 1444, Santa Maria della Colomba was granted in commendam, initiating a period of administrative instability that continued until 1805, when its assets were confiscated by the French state. Already at the end of the fifteenth century, however, the abbey had been incorporated into the Lombard province of the Cistercian Congregation. During the Baroque period, the monastic complex underwent extensive reconstruction, resulting in much of the architectural appearance visible today.

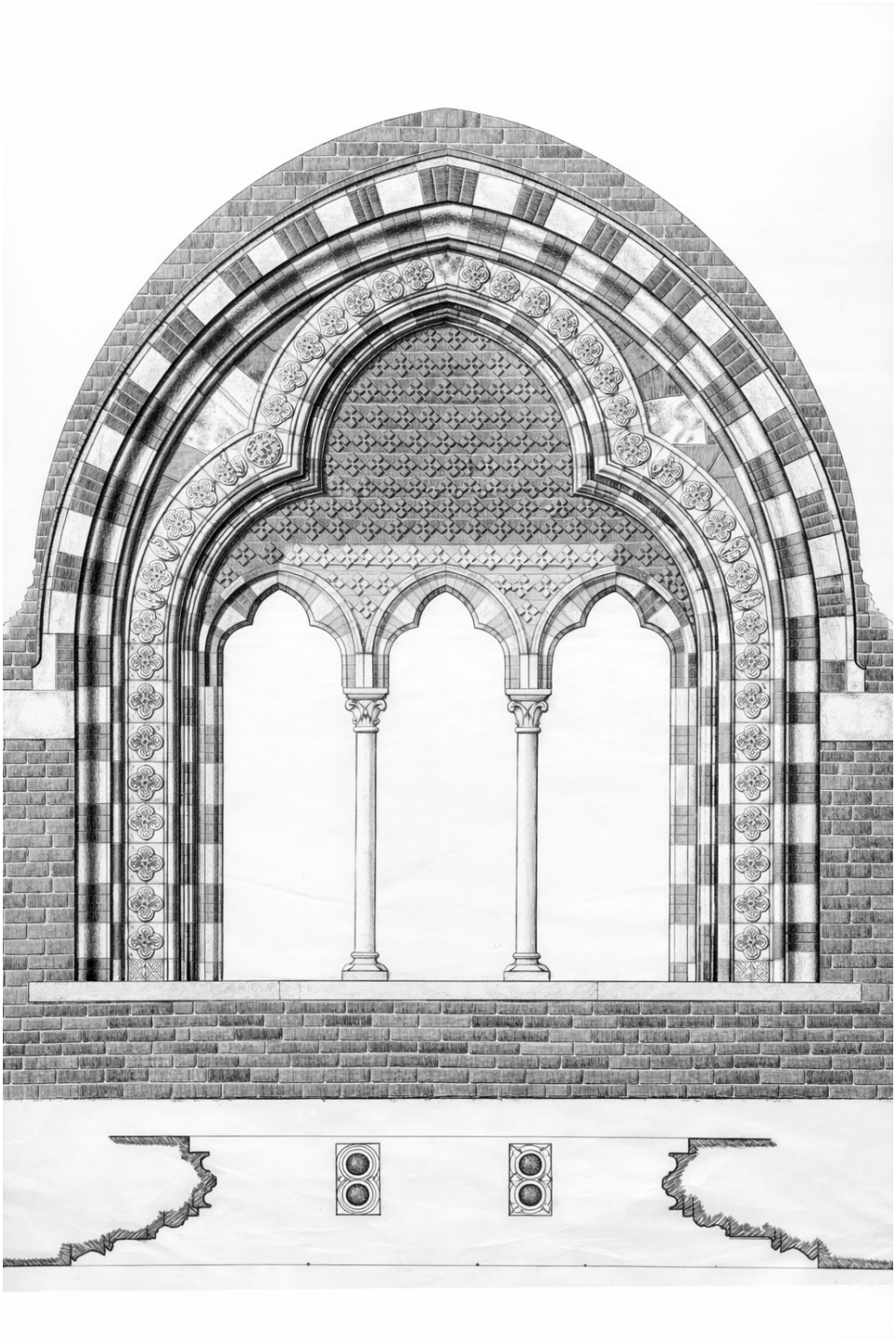

Figure 25. "(PIACENZA) Alseno/ Abbazia di Chiaravalle/ – Rilievo di una finestra," negative photographic print, XX first half (approx. 1926–1940), Catalogo generale dei Beni Culturali, Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione, Ministry of Culture (Italy). Accessed February 19, 2026.

The suppression of the monastery in 1769 by Ferdinand of Parma marked another critical turning point, although the monks were able, for a time, to recover their possessions by paying a financial ransom. Shortly thereafter, the abbey was transferred to the Roman province of the same Congregation. The Napoleonic expropriations led to the transfer of the abbey's properties to Maria Luisa of Parma, who subsequently donated them to the civic hospices of Piacenza. In 1810, the remaining monks were forced to abandon the Colomba, leaving only a prior with the title of abbot-parish priest.

A renewed monastic presence was established in 1937, when the abbot-parish priest Giovanni Bertuzzi secured the annexation of Santa Maria della Colomba to the Cistercian Congregation of Casamari. Through the settlement of a small religious community, the abbey was once again revitalized, marking the final phase in a long history of continuity, rupture, and transformation. Today, Santa Maria della Colomba stands as a stratified architectural and spiritual site, reflecting both the internal dynamics of Cistercian monasticism and the broader political, economic, and territorial changes of northern Italy.

4.3 Historical and Artistic Analysis

The most recent comprehensive study of Santa Maria della Colomba, conducted by Corvi and Spinelli, places the construction of the abbey between approximately 1145 and the mid–thirteenth century. This chronology situates the complex within the formative phase of Cistercian architecture in northern Italy, at a moment of experimentation and gradual stylistic definition.

The church, remarkable for its scale, is laid out on a three-aisled basilican plan. The central nave is divided into four bays, while each lateral aisle comprises eight bays. The spatial articulation is defined by a system of ribbed vaults: the central nave is covered by ribbed cross-vaults, whereas the side aisles feature smooth cross-vaults. These vaults are separated by transverse arches constructed in alternating stone and brick. The slightly domed profile of the vaults recalls early Romanesque experiments in Lombardy, such as those observed at Sant'Ambrogio in Milan, indicating a shared structural vocabulary in the early adoption of ribbed systems. In contrast, barrel vaults with pointed profiles cover the two outer chapels on the right side of the choir and the adjacent arm of the transept.

Brick constitutes the predominant building material, in keeping with the Cistercian architectural tradition of the Po Valley. Its warm chromatic quality is counterbalanced by the use of light-colored stone in decorative details, following a Padano-Cistercian model. The extensive application of white plaster, however, has partially obscured the original brick texture of the walls. The structural system is characterized by an alternating support scheme: square-section piers articulated with engaged half-columns and vertical projections. These elements alternate between half-columns rising from the ground and terminating at a certain height with inverted conical forms, and half-columns beginning at

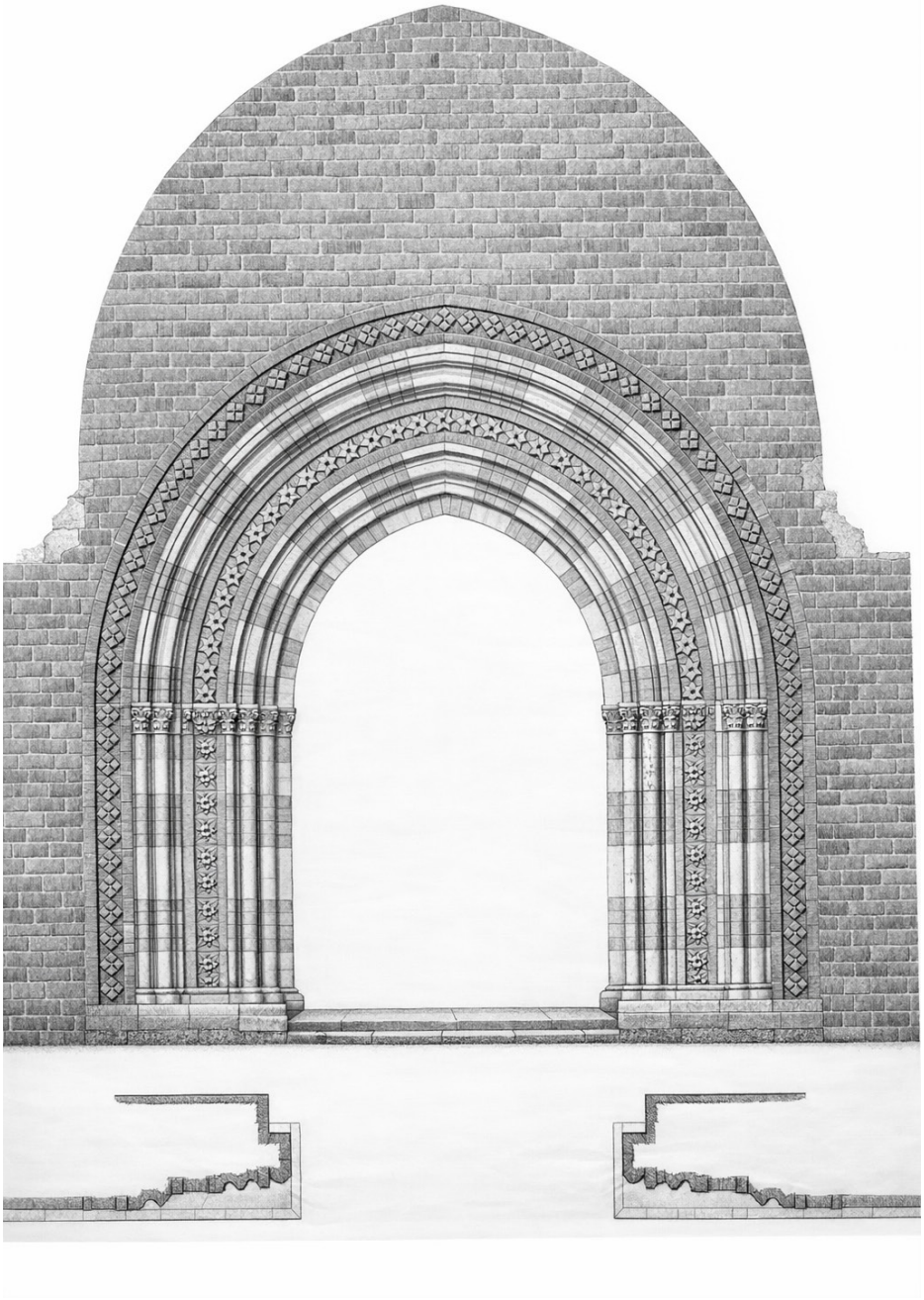

Figure 26. "Piacenza/ Alseno [Parma cancellato]/ Abbazia di Chiaravalle della Colomba/ Disegno della porta della sala capi-to=/ lare sul chiostro" negative photographic print, XX first half (approx. 1926–1940), Catalogo generale dei Beni Culturali, Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione, Ministry of Culture (Italy). Accessed February 19, 2026.

ground level but interrupted at the springing of the arches by inverted corbels. Scholars have offered differing interpretations of this system. Some suggest that the half-columns became structurally redundant following a shift from an original design based on rectangular bays to one with square bays. Romanini, by contrast, proposed that the vaults were originally conceived as sexpartite, drawing a direct comparison with the cathedral of Piacenza—an interpretation later endorsed by Fraccaro de Longhi.

Several piers have lost their bases, likely removed during Baroque reconstructions. Moreover, the lower portions of most supports have been altered by incisions in the brickwork followed by layers of lime plaster, a hygienic measure adopted to prevent the spread of contagious diseases during recurrent epidemics in the Po Valley.

The capitals display a restrained decorative vocabulary, featuring early crochets or ship-prow (carinated) forms with stylized vegetal and geometric motifs. One capital—the sixth from the west on the right side—appears to be a later reconstruction. The corbels (culots), by contrast, are left plain. Above the choir there likely once rose a lantern, which, according to Bertuzzi, collapsed in the sixteenth century. Subsequently, the present bell tower was erected at the northern end of the transept around 1570.

The choir follows a typically Bernardine arrangement and is flanked by six chapels. The two outermost chapels were added slightly later and are now characterized by Baroque decorative elements that contrast sharply with the medieval sobriety of the rest of the church. The two chapels adjacent to the choir reach the same height as the central nave at the apex of their vaults, while the remaining four are significantly lower—a choice interpreted by Fraccaro de Longhi as motivated by economic considerations, both in labor and materials.

In the apse, a rose window composed of five oculi—one central and four peripheral—crowns two round-arched lancet windows. The high altar, dating to the eighteenth century, reflects Baroque taste, as do the painted decorations that embellish, and in some cases obscure, the presbyterial area. Above the triumphal arch, two additional oculi are set into the masonry, highlighted by a bichrome interplay of stone and brick.

On the southern side of the transept is the staircase that originally led to the monks' dormitory. Although its current position differs from the original, traces remain visible in the masonry. Nearby is the entrance to the so-called Sacrarium, which functioned as the sacristy. This octagonal space is covered by an umbrella vault and decorated with fourteenth-century frescoes. In the sixteenth century, large rectangular windows replaced the original openings, compromising the structural integrity of the space and necessitating the construction of external buttresses. The altar visible today was consecrated in 1913 and consciously evokes medieval forms.

The façade, freed in the early twentieth century from approximately sixty centimeters of accumulated soil that had distorted its proportions, is defined by a broken

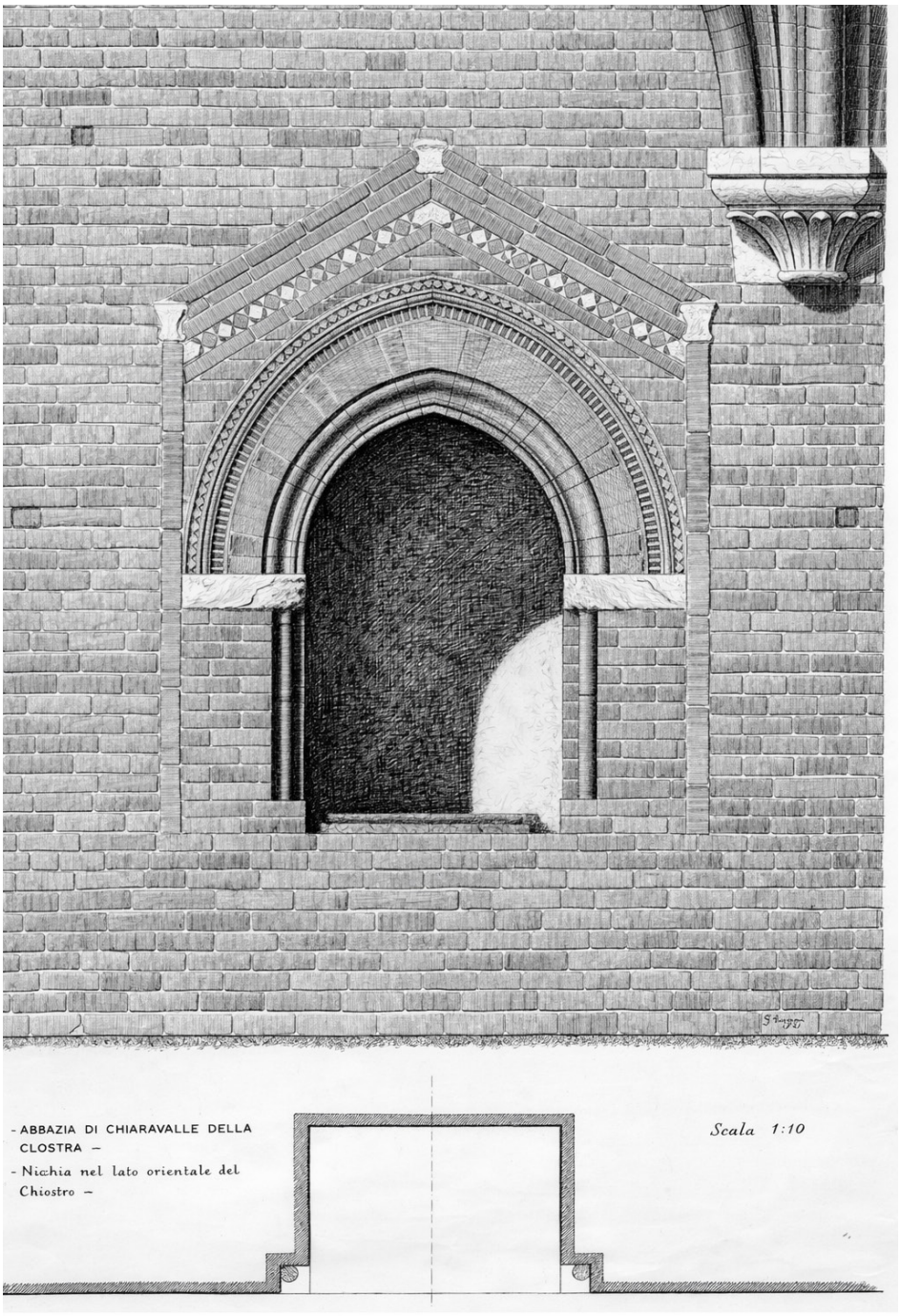

Figure 27. "Piacenza/ Alseno [Parma cancellato]/ Abbazia di Chiaravalle della Colomba/ Disegno di una nicchia del chiostro" negative photographic print, XX first half (approx. 1926–1940), Catalogo generale dei Beni Culturali, Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione, Ministry of Culture (Italy). Accessed February 19, 2026.

gable and vertically articulated into three sections by buttresses. It is decorated with projecting blind arcades crowned by a sawtooth cornice. Similar arcading appears above and below the rose window, into which two half-columns are integrated, framing a cross carved directly into the masonry—a motif also found at Fontevivo.

At the center of the façade opens a marble rose window with colonnettes and ten lights, dated by Corvi and Spinelli to the second half of the thirteenth century. The adjoining portico, contemporary with the rose window, mirrors the façade's broken gable and is articulated by four buttresses. It is flanked by two lateral wings corresponding to the side aisles, each opened by round-arched triforas and crowned with blind arcades. The central bay features a portal with a bichrome archivolt supported by pilasters, flanked by two pointed single-light windows separated by robust brick half-columns. The portico is vaulted with ribbed cross-vaults in the central bay and smooth vaults in the lateral bays. Above the wings, two oculi illuminate the side aisles.

On the left side of the portico stands a small Gothic shrine in pink Verona breccia, traditionally identified as the tomb of Marquis Pallavicini, one of the abbey's early benefactors. Bertuzzi, however, suggested that it was intended for the abbots. The main portal is surmounted by a lunette depicting the Adoration of the Child by the Virgin, executed in a pictorial manner that recalls fifteenth-century stylistic conventions.

Regarding the church as a whole, both Fraccaro de Longhi and Romanini emphasized its affinities with early Cistercian architecture in Lombardy. Romanini in particular observed that, as in Chiaravalle Milanese, the abbey of the Colomba presents an embryonic yet clear anticipation of the principal lines of regional Gothic architecture, underscoring the close relationship between Piacentine and Lombard architectural cultures.

The cloister, dated by some scholars to the late thirteenth century and by others to the fourteenth, and classically square in plan, is unanimously regarded as one of the finest preserved Cistercian examples. Its distinction lies in the richness of its sculptural decoration, executed in pink breccia and light stone. This includes paired colonnettes of varying forms—some ophitic at the four corners—and sculpted corbels featuring anthropomorphic and zoomorphic motifs, elements atypical of the earliest artistic phase of the Order. The cloister bays are covered by cross-vaults whose ribs rest on decorated corbels within the cloister, while each bay opens outward through a quadrifora. Interlaced blind arcades run along the upper exterior of the cloister, while simpler blind arcades crown the outer walls of the church.

Also surviving from the original construction is the chapter house, which collapsed in 1892 and was restored in 1917. Internally divided into three bays, it features an elaborate portal with a multi-moulded archivolt enriched by geometric motifs in brick and stone. On either side of the entrance are two large triforas, reconstructed between 1925 and 1928, characterized by complex trilobed and pointed-arch compositions supported by paired colonnettes and framed by richly patterned terracotta ornamentation.

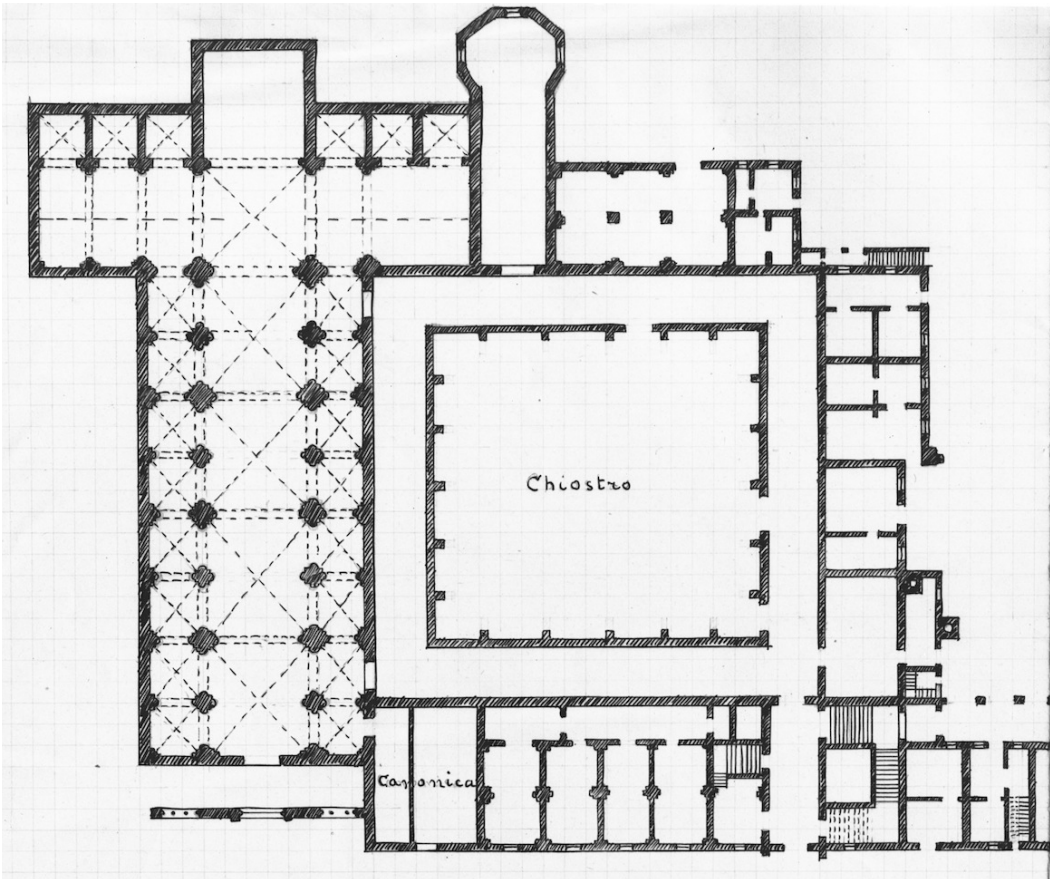

Figure 28. "Alseno (Piacenza)/ Abbazia di Chiaravalle della/ Colomba. Pianta della Chiesa e dell'ex/ Monastero" negative photographic print, XX first half (approx. 1926–1940), Catalogo generale dei Beni Culturali, Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione, Ministry of Culture (Italy). Accessed February 19, 2026.

The remaining buildings of the complex were largely rebuilt in later periods: some in the sixteenth century, including the western portico with its overlying bifora and the bell tower, and others between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, notably the portico-like structure on three sides adjoining the medieval cloister.

4.4 Spatial and Symbolic Analysis of the Cloister

The cloister of Chiaravalle della Colomba is analysed here as a disciplinary and contemplative device, rather than as a garden in the pictorial or devotional sense. In alignment with Bernard of Clairvaux's Apologia ad Guillelmum abbatem, the cloister resists sensory attraction and directs attention toward rhythm, repetition, and regulated movement.

Spatially, the cloister operates through:

- the repetition of identical bays, reinforcing temporal continuity,
- a controlled relationship between interior and exterior,
- a central open space defined more by absence than by content.

Symbolically, this configuration corresponds to Bernard's conception of the hortus conclusus as an interiorised garden of the soul, cultivated through discipline rather than representation. The cloister does not stage paradise; it conditions the monk to withdraw from the visible. The vegetal presence, historically minimal and functional, reinforces this reading by avoiding ornamental or allegorical excess.

Methodologically, the cloister is interpreted through a combined lens:

- Bernardine textual analysis (Apologia, Sermones super Cantica Canticorum),
- architectural morphology,
- and experiential reading of movement, enclosure, and silence.

This approach allows the cloister to be understood as a theological spatial practice, rather than a symbolic image.

4.5 Reading the Garden Today: Site-specific narratives and interpretations.

Today, the cloister garden of Chiaravalle della Colomba presents a carefully maintained but interpretatively open condition. Unlike heavily reconstructed monastic gardens, the vegetal arrangement remains restrained, allowing the architectural framework to dominate the perception of space. Nevertheless, the garden is inevitably shaped by contemporary expectations of medieval monastic life, often projected onto it through

Figure 29. Le Corbusier Couvet Saint-Marie De La Tourette. Photo essay by Thilo Rohländer (Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

guided narratives and cultural programming.

The present reading of the cloister oscillates between:

- a space of residual monastic silence,
- a heritage site open to visitors,
- and a symbolic representation of Cistercian spirituality.

This ambiguity is methodologically productive. Rather than attempting to recover an unattainable historical authenticity, the thesis reads the garden as a site of layered meanings, where Bernardine inwardness coexists uneasily with modern visibility. The cloister thus becomes a place where the transformation of the hortus conclusus—from ascetic spatial condition to cultural symbol—can be critically examined.

Reading the garden today involves identifying:

- what elements foster recollection,
- what elements encourage contemplation as spectacle,
- and where silence is spatially supported or undermined.

4.6 Precedents and Inspirations for Intervention.

The intervention proposed for the cloister of Santa Maria di Chiaravalle della Colomba is informed by a series of architectural and landscape precedents that do not function as formal models, but rather as conceptual and methodological references. These precedents, drawn from monastic tradition, modern architecture, and contemporary practices of intervention in historic contexts, provide a framework within which the project situates itself as a critical continuation of an inherited spatial logic.

The primary reference for any intervention within a Cistercian cloister necessarily lies in the architectural tradition of the Order itself. **Medieval Cistercian abbeys such as Fontenay, Le Thoronet, and the early phases of Clairvaux** establish a rigorous spatial model in which the cloister garden is conceived as a quadripartite, enclosed space governed by proportion, repetition, and restraint. In these examples, the garden is not treated as a decorative element but as a regulated void, a measured emptiness that mediates between built form and monastic life. The absence of ornamental excess and the clarity of spatial organization suggest an approach to intervention based on subtraction and legibility rather than addition. Within this framework, any contemporary action can be understood as a reinforcement of spatial order and symbolic coherence, rather than as an act of formal innovation.

Beyond medieval precedents, significant methodological inspiration can be found in modern approaches to architectural intervention in historic and stratified contexts. **The**

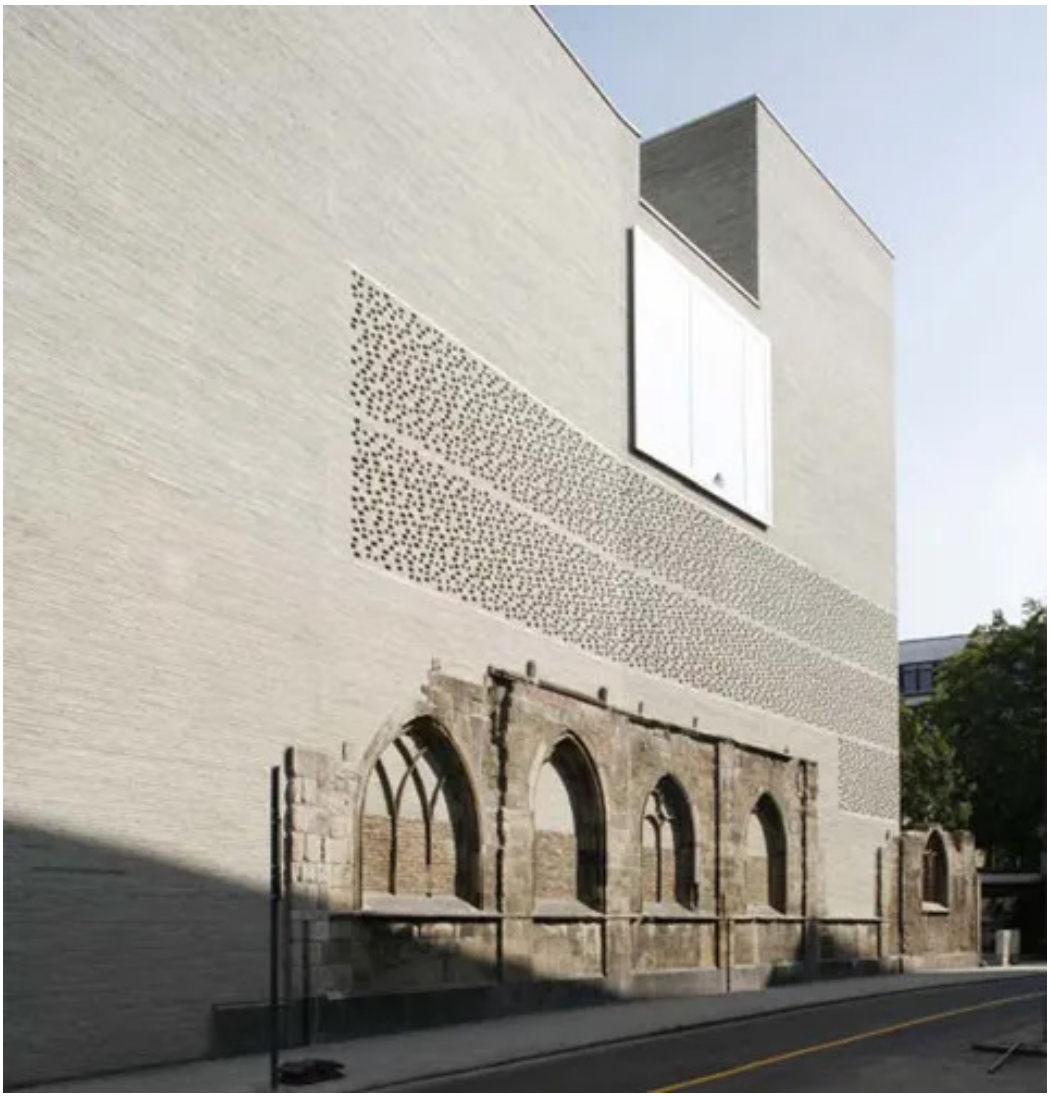

Figure 30. Peter Zumthor's Kolumba Museum in Cologne (Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

work of Carlo Scarpa, particularly at Castelvecchio in Verona, offers a compelling model for designing in dialogue with existing structures without resorting to imitation or stylistic continuity. Scarpa's interventions are characterized by a precise articulation of materials, a clear distinction between old and new, and a deep attentiveness to the temporal layers of the site. Although not monastic in nature, this approach provides a valuable reference for intervening within a cloister where traces, absences, and discontinuities are integral to the architectural narrative. The project thus adopts an attitude of critical restraint, in which new elements function as interpretative devices rather than as replacements of historical form.

Modern monastic architecture also provides relevant precedents for understanding how contemporary design can engage with the spiritual and spatial principles of monastic life. **Le Corbusier's Monastery of Sainte-Marie de La Tourette** represents a radical reinterpretation of the cloister typology, yet one that preserves its essential functions as a space of circulation, pause, and introspection. The emphasis on enclosure, rhythm, and light as primary architectural elements demonstrates that continuity with monastic tradition does not depend on formal replication, but on the preservation of spatial conditions conducive to silence and contemplation. This precedent supports the legitimacy of a contemporary intervention within a historic cloister, provided that the underlying symbolic and experiential dimensions of the space are respected.

Further inspiration can be drawn from contemporary practices that engage with historical contexts through atmosphere, materiality, and sensory experience. **Peter Zumthor's Kolumba Museum in Cologne** exemplifies an approach in which architecture emerges from ruin through careful material articulation and controlled spatial sequences. While not a landscape project, Kolumba offers a powerful reference for understanding how intervention can enhance perception of time, memory, and continuity. Applied to the cloister garden, this sensibility encourages an intervention that privileges slowness, tactile experience, and the act of walking, reinforcing the garden's role as a temporal and meditative space rather than a visual composition.

A more direct connection to Cistercian ideals can be found in **John Pawson's work at the Novy Dvur Monastery**, where minimalist architectural language is employed to reinterpret monastic principles of simplicity, order, and silence. Pawson's intervention demonstrates how contemporary design can align with Cistercian values through extreme material reduction and spatial clarity, avoiding decorative gestures in favor of geometry, repetition, and light. This approach reinforces the notion that restraint and coherence are not limitations, but active design strategies deeply rooted in monastic tradition.

Finally, these architectural precedents are supported and contextualized by theoretical and textual sources that inform the symbolic dimension of the intervention. Bernard of Clairvaux's critique of superfluous ornament, articulated in the Apologia ad Guillelmum, provides a foundational ethical framework for understanding the Cistercian

Figure 31. Abbey of Our Lady of Nový Dvůr by John Pawson Bohemia, Czech Republic 2009 – 2014. Photography by Gilbert McCarragher (Shared under a Creative Commons licence)

attitude toward space and form. Classical and medieval conceptions of the garden as ordered nature further reinforce the idea of the cloister garden as a space governed by ordo rather than by representational intent. Within this theoretical horizon, the proposed intervention can be read not as a contemporary imposition, but as a reactivation of an inherited spatial grammar, capable of mediating between historical continuity and present-day use.

Figure 32, 33, 34 and 35. Interior view of the cloister and the lavatorium. Photograph by the author, digitally modified, 2026.

Chapter 5

Contemporary Intervention: Reinterpreting the Cloister Garden

5.1 Design Intentions and Conceptual Framework

The intervention is situated on the archaeological footprint of the former Cistercian lavabo, of which no formal documentation survives. Only the octagonal foundation remains embedded in the cloister ground. In the absence of reliable historical evidence, any attempt at formal reconstruction would necessarily be speculative.

The project therefore adopts a position grounded in contemporary conservation ethics: it rejects conjectural reconstruction and instead articulates absence as a design strategy. This position is aligned with Article 9 of the Venice Charter (1964), which states that restoration must stop where conjecture begins and that any additions must be distinguishable from the historical fabric.

Rather than reconstructing a hypothetical medieval structure, the proposal introduces four semi-columns of varying heights arranged within the octagonal trace, together with a central circular fountain recalling the lavabo's original purificatory function. These vertical fragments do not attempt to recreate walls, arches, or roofing systems. They remain incomplete by intention.

Conceptually, the project is framed as a "ruin of the ruin": a contemporary architectural fragment that acknowledges the prior loss of the historical fragment. It does not aim to recover an image of the past, but to render visible the condition of disappearance.

This stance resonates profoundly with the spiritual and architectural ethos

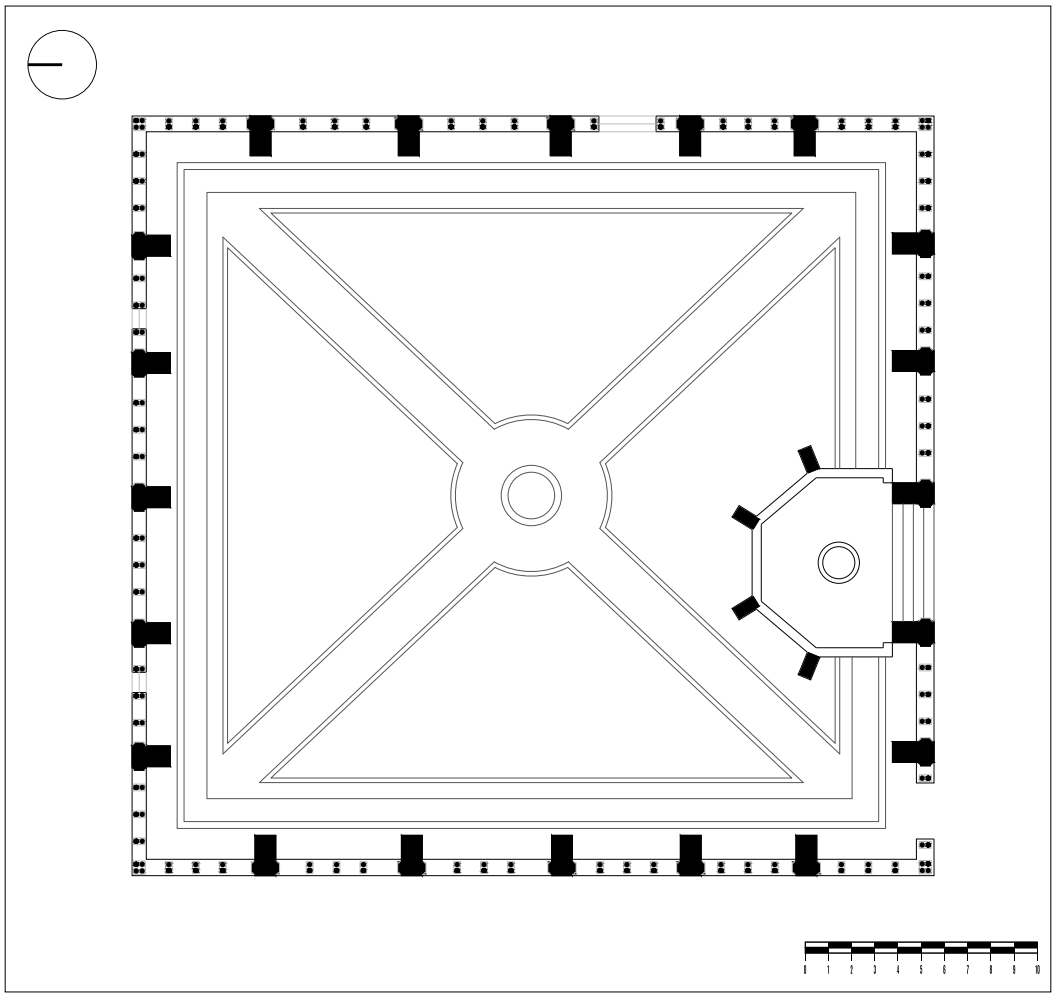

Figure 36. Plan of the cloister and the inserted project, by Alexander Nikulenko, 2026. Author's own drawing.

promoted by Bernard of Clairvaux. In his Apologia ad Guillelmum, Bernard famously criticized excessive ornamentation and the distraction of the senses within monastic architecture. For Bernard, architectural space was to support contemplation through simplicity, clarity, and material restraint. Beauty was not to arise from decoration, but from proportion, silence, and order.

The intervention extends this logic into the realm of conservation. Just as Bernard rejected superfluous ornament, the project rejects superfluous reconstruction. It embraces austerity not only as aesthetic language but as ethical position.

5.2 Strategies for Revealing and Amplifying Austerity and Contemplation

Fragment as Ontological Statement

The semi-columns operate as deliberate fragments. Their rectangular section suggests attachment to a lost wall, yet no wall is reconstructed. Their differing heights prevent any reconstitution of a coherent architectural order. No entablature is implied; no roof is possible.

This strategy echoes Cesare Brandi's theory of restoration, particularly his assertion that restoration must preserve both the historical and aesthetic unity of the work without falsifying its temporal authenticity. Brandi insists that the historical work of art must not be reintegrated in a way that creates historical deception. In this project, the fragment becomes an instrument of truth. It declares incompleteness rather than masking it. The intervention does not simulate continuity; it exposes rupture.

Material and Temporal Legibility

The new elements are executed in pale limestone that resonates chromatically with the cloister while remaining distinguishable in detailing and finish. Joints are precise and contemporary; surfaces are smooth but undecorated.

This material strategy reinforces the principle of recognizability established in modern conservation doctrine: additions must be legible as interventions of their time. The semi-columns are neither mimetic replicas nor aggressively contrasting insertions. They occupy a measured middle ground — respectful but clearly contemporary. Such restraint also reflects the Cistercian architectural tradition, historically characterized by clarity of structure and absence of superfluous embellishment. The intervention does not aestheticize the medieval; it shares its discipline.

Water as Continuity of Function

The central circular fountain reinstates the essential function of the lavabo: purification before entering the refectory. While the architecture remains fragmentary, the

Figure 36. Night view of the project, by Alexander Nikulenko, 2026. Author's own drawing.

act of water persists.

This distinction is critical. The project avoids reconstructing form but restores function symbolically and atmospherically. Water becomes the element of continuity across temporal rupture. It establishes a phenomenological bridge between medieval ritual and contemporary experience. The sound of water introduces a quiet acoustic field that reinforces contemplative presence — a spatial condition deeply consistent with Bernardine spirituality, where silence and interior recollection were paramount.

Light and Dematerialization

At night, discreet uplighting transforms the semi-columns into vertical luminous traces. They appear less as solid mass and more as immaterial presences.This dematerialization reinforces the conceptual emphasis on memory rather than reconstruction. The intervention becomes an atmospheric condition rather than an object. Light, in this sense, operates symbolically: not as theatrical illumination, but as subtle revelation — an architectural analogy to spiritual clarity.

5.3 Spatial Narrative and Sensory Engagement

The intervention reorganizes perception without altering the cloister's geometry.

Approach

From the cloister arcade, the semi-columns appear as isolated vertical fragments rising from the garden. Their incomplete arrangement resists immediate comprehension, encouraging interpretive engagement. They do not define a conventional enclosure. Instead, they create a permeable field that invites entry without imposing direction.

Center

Within the octagonal footprint, the visitor stands in a space defined more by suggestion than by containment. The absence of a roof intensifies awareness of sky and weather. The intervention frames emptiness rather than filling it.

The circular basin at the center anchors the composition geometrically. The reflection of the semi-columns in the water produces a temporary visual completion — a mirrored wholeness that exists only as image. This phenomenon metaphorically reinforces Brandi's concept of aesthetic unity perceived by the observer, without materially falsifying the object.

Sensory Dimension

The experience unfolds through:

The tactile coolness of limestone. The subdued resonance of water. The shifting shadows of incomplete vertical elements. The reflection of light in the basin.

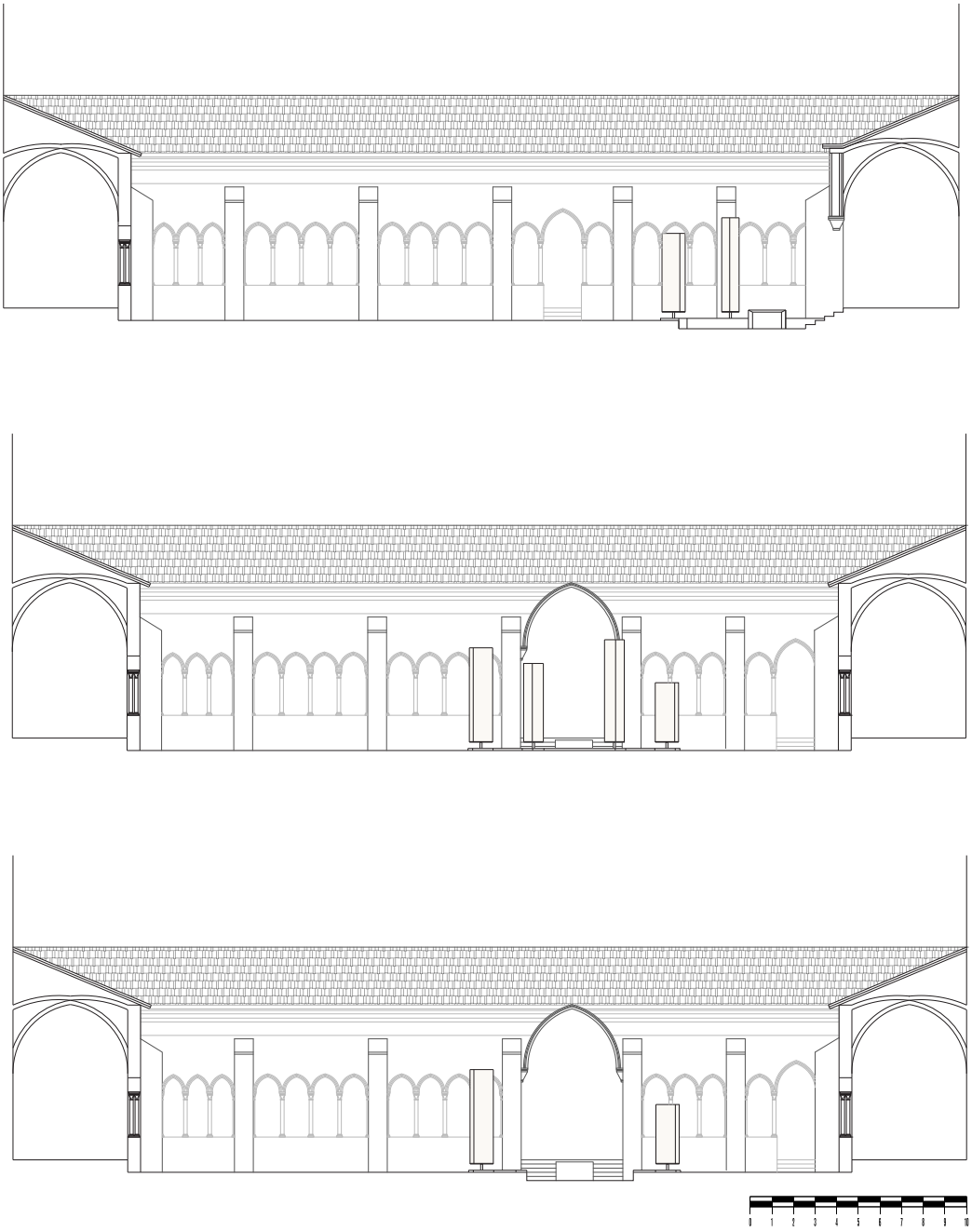

Figure 37, 38 and 39. Sections aa, bb and cc, by Alexander Nikulenko, 2026. Author's own drawing.

The space remains fundamentally austere. There is no decorative excess. No narrative signage interrupts the contemplative field. The intervention relies on proportion, silence, and material clarity — principles deeply aligned with Bernard's architectural theology.

5.4 Drawings, Models, and Visualizations of the Proposed Intervention

The project development integrates archaeological mapping, proportional studies, and theoretical positioning.

Plan

The plan strictly adheres to the extant octagonal foundation. The four semi-columns are positioned asymmetrically yet balanced, preventing any direct reconstruction of medieval geometry while preserving compositional coherence.

The circular fountain is inscribed concentrically, reinforcing the tension between historical trace (octagon) and contemporary insertion (circle).

Sections

Sections articulate the deliberate incompleteness of the intervention. The varying heights of the semi-columns deny structural closure. The absence of a roof is explicit and uncompromising.

The intervention remains subordinate in scale to the cloister arcades, preserving historical hierarchy.

Models and Renderings

Physical and digital models test light behavior, proportional balance, and visual permeability. Renderings demonstrate how the intervention shifts character between daylight and dusk — from mineral fragments to luminous traces.

These visualizations confirm that the proposal operates less as reconstructed object and more as critical architectural commentary.

5.5 Constructive Articulation of the Steel–Stone Interface

The structural and symbolic coherence of the project is materially condensed in the junction between the limestone semi-columns and the steel pilastrini that elevate them above the remains of the former lavabo foundations. This detail is not merely a technical solution; it is the architectural mechanism that enables the conceptual condition of

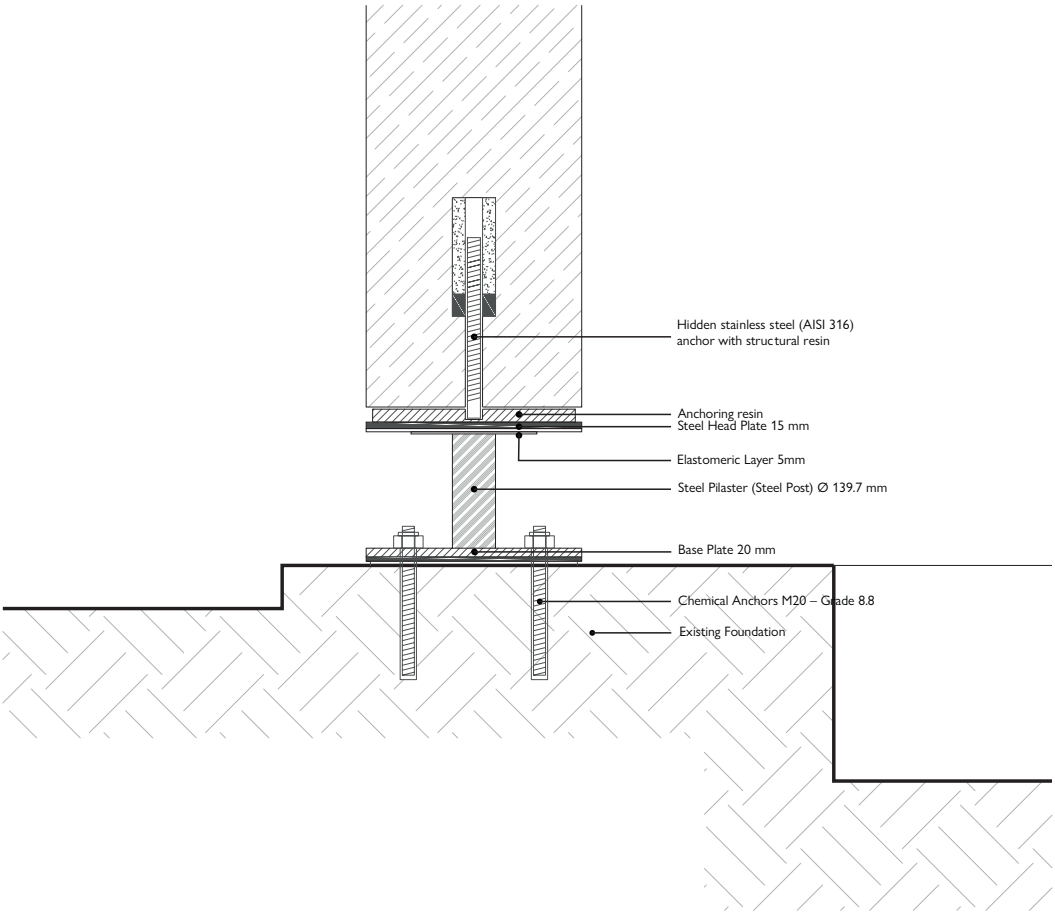

Figure 40. Architectural Detail of the column, by Alexander Nikulenko, 2026. Author's own drawing.

suspension — the perception that the stone masses hover lightly above the archaeological substrate.

Structural Logic

The limestone semi-columns are conceived to work exclusively in compression, in accordance with the intrinsic mechanical behavior of the material. The steel element, by contrast, performs as a slender intermediary support, transferring vertical loads to the existing foundations while minimizing visual presence.

The load path follows a clear and controlled sequence: marble block → limestone semi-column → steel distribution plate → steel pilastrino → base plate → chemical anchors → existing foundation.

To avoid stress concentrations and potential cracking in the stone, the load is not transmitted directly through a point contact. A welded steel head plate is introduced at the top of the pilastrino to ensure uniform stress distribution across the bearing surface.

Hidden Anchorage System

Although the stone is designed to act in compression, lateral stability and anti-overturning control are achieved through a concealed stainless steel (AISI 316) threaded rod inserted axially within the limestone element. The rod is bonded using structural epoxy resin, ensuring durability and resistance to environmental conditions.

Importantly, this anchorage does not function as the primary load-bearing system; rather, it guarantees positional stability and prevents horizontal displacement. This distinction preserves the tectonic honesty of the stone as a compressive body.

Elastic Interface and Material Mediation

Between the steel distribution plate and the limestone base, a thin elastomeric layer (approximately 5 mm) is interposed. This element performs multiple roles: compensates for micro-irregularities in surface leveling, mitigates differential thermal expansion between steel and stone, reduces peak stress transmission, introduces a subtle cushioning effect.

This layer becomes an invisible yet fundamental mediator between two materially and behaviorally distinct substances.

Foundation Connection

At the base, the steel pilastrino is welded to a steel base plate mechanically fixed to the existing foundation through chemical anchors. This solution avoids invasive demolition while ensuring structural reliability. The intervention therefore remains reversible in principle, respecting the archaeological memory embedded in the site.

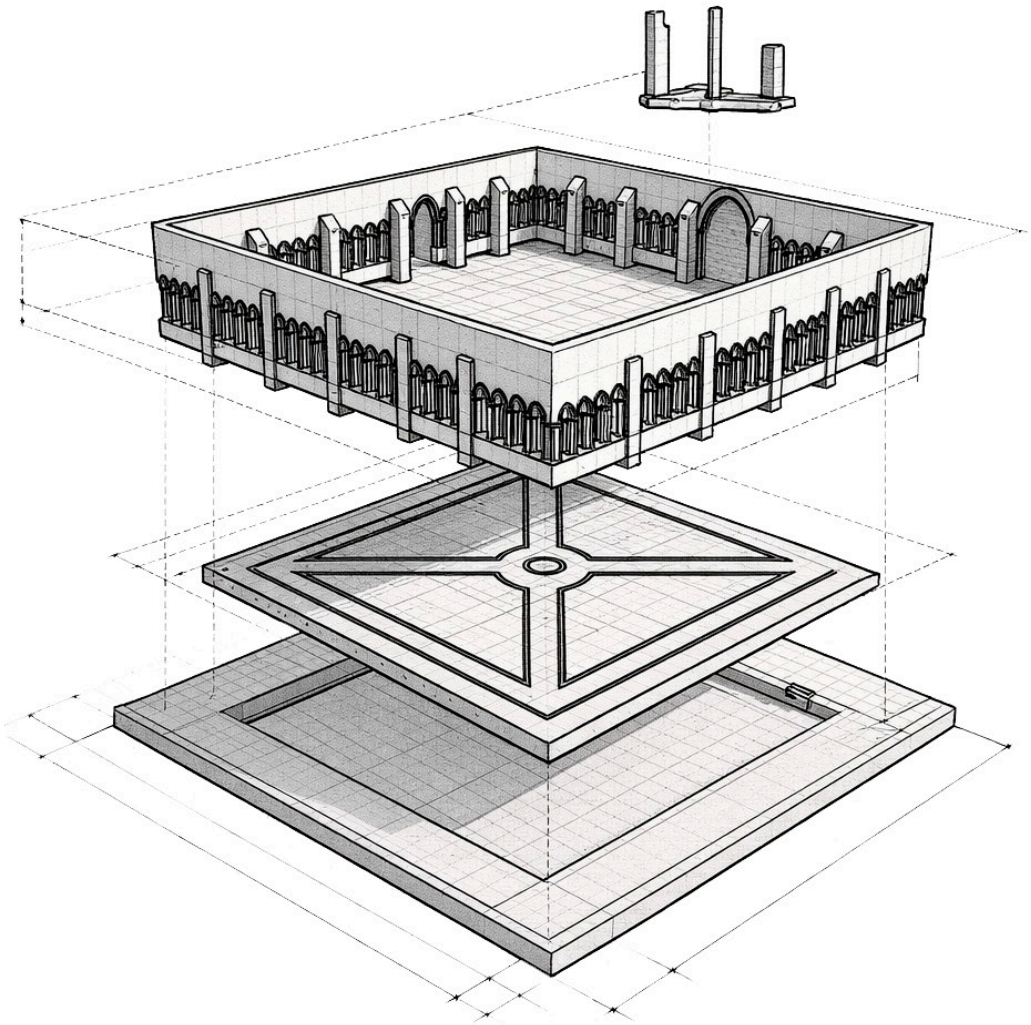

Figure 41. Axonometric view of the the cloister and the project, by Alexander Nikulenko, 2026. Author's own drawing.

Tectonic and Conceptual Implications

The junction articulates a deliberate contrast between mass and slenderness, weight and suspension, permanence and precision. The limestone retains its monolithic gravity, while the steel element, reduced in diameter and visually recessed, produces the perceptual effect of levitation.

Rather than concealing construction, the detail refines it. The interface becomes the threshold where material logic and symbolic intention converge. It embodies the project's broader aim: to construct continuity without mimicry, and to anchor contemporary intervention within historical substrata without imposing upon them.

In this sense, the steel–stone connection is not a secondary technical matter but the tectonic fulcrum of the entire architectural proposal.

5.6 Reflection on the Intervention's Dialog with History

The project positions itself within a contemporary lineage of critical restoration. It refuses stylistic imitation and avoids archaeological romanticism. Instead, it accepts historical discontinuity as an architectural condition.

In alignment with the Venice Charter and Brandi's restoration theory, the intervention:

Avoids conjectural reconstruction.

Ensures legibility of temporal layers.

Preserves the authenticity of the surviving foundation.

Introduces additions that are distinguishable yet harmonious.

Simultaneously, it resonates with Bernardine austerity. Bernard of Clairvaux advocated for architecture that disciplines perception and directs the soul toward contemplation. This intervention extends that discipline into the ethical realm of conservation. It resists spectacle. It privileges restraint. It transforms loss into meditative presence.

The four semi-columns do not claim authority over the past. They mark its absence.

The project does not attempt to recover a lost image of the medieval lavabo. Instead, it constructs a spatial meditation on disappearance — an architecture that stands between archaeology and memory.

In doing so, it does not restore the building.

It restores consciousness of its loss.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to investigate the medieval hortus conclusus not merely as a literary or iconographic motif, but as a spatial construct whose symbolic density found one of its most rigorous architectural expressions in the Cistercian cloister. By tracing the theological genealogy of the enclosed garden—from Edenic archetype to Marian metaphor, from courtly locus amoenus to allegorical landscape—it has demonstrated that the medieval garden operated as a charged field of meaning where enclosure, purity, desire, and cosmic order intersected. The garden was never neutral terrain. It was a site where theology, anthropology, gender discourse, and spatial imagination converged.

Within this symbolic inheritance, the Cistercian Order performed a decisive transformation. Rather than replicating the ornamental richness of Marian imagery or the sensorial abundance of courtly gardens, Cistercian architecture translated the hortus conclusus into a disciplined geometry of restraint. In doing so, it neither abandoned the garden's symbolic power nor emptied it of meaning. Instead, it reoriented that meaning toward interiority. The cloister garden became an architecture of silence: a space where enclosure no longer signified erotic exclusivity or allegorical spectacle, but recollection, communal order, and spiritual vigilance.

Through textual analysis of Bernardine thought and the Statuta, combined with architectural study and symbolic mapping, this research has shown that Cistercian purism was not aesthetic impoverishment but a deliberate theological position. The rejection of excess did not deny beauty; it redefined it. Proportion, light, material honesty, and spatial clarity replaced narrative decoration as vehicles of contemplation. The cloister thus emerged as a spatial allegory embodied in stone—an axis mundi structured around repetition, rhythm, and measured void.

The case study of the Abbey of Santa Maria di Chiaravalle della Colomba allowed these theoretical claims to be grounded in material and experiential analysis. The cloister revealed itself as both microcosm and instrument: its geometry organizing movement, its central void structuring perception, its arcades choreographing daily ritual. Here, the hortus conclusus is neither pictorial nor metaphorical; it is walked, circumnavigated, inhabited. The garden's symbolic enclosure becomes an embodied discipline.

The design-research intervention extended this historical inquiry into contemporary architectural practice. Rather than imposing a foreign language onto the cloister, the project sought to amplify latent qualities already present: austerity, proportion, vertical tension, and the dialogue between stone and void. By introducing a restrained steel articulation around the memory of the ancient lavabo, the intervention reactivates the cloister's center without disrupting its contemplative equilibrium. The project does not seek contrast for its own sake; it seeks resonance. It proposes that contemporary architecture can engage history not through mimicry, but through structural empathy.

In this sense, the thesis argues for the cloister as a living paradigm rather than a closed relic. The Cistercian garden offers a spatial model urgently relevant to the present: a model grounded in measured reduction, sensory clarity, and ethical restraint. In an era marked by overstimulation, environmental fragility, and architectural spectacle, the Cistercian cloister suggests an alternative trajectory—one in which silence is not absence, but presence intensified; where enclosure fosters reflection rather than exclusion; and where architecture shapes consciousness through proportion and light rather than image and excess.

Ultimately, the hortus conclusus persists not because of nostalgia for a lost medieval world, but because it articulates a perennial architectural question: how can space cultivate interior life? The Cistercian answer was radical in its simplicity. By withdrawing from ornament, by disciplining nature into geometry, by structuring daily movement around a void, the cloister transformed the garden into a school of perception.

If paradise in medieval thought was both memory and promise, then the cloister stands between them—an earthly rehearsal of cosmic order. Its relevance today lies not in reconstructing the past, but in reactivating its spatial intelligence. The enclosed garden remains a threshold: between noise and silence, excess and measure, distraction and contemplation. In recovering its logic, this thesis proposes that architecture, even now, can still shape the conditions for sacred thought.

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