

Clausura dalam Negosiasi: Isolasi Karthusian, Hospitalitas Monastik, dan Transformasi Ruang Kontemplatif di Biara Santa Maria Scala Coeli, Évora, Portugal

Clausura under Negotiation: Carthusian Isolation, Monastic Hospitality, and the Transformation of Contemplative Space at the Santa Maria Scala Coeli Monastery, Évora, Portugal

Maria Joao Castro

Universidade NOVA, Lisboa, Portugal

Email: mariajoaocastro@fcsih.unl.pt

Submit: 14 July 2025 | Revision: 30 March 2026 | Accepted: 28 April 2026 | Published: 22 May 2026



©2026 by the author. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Abstrak: Studi ini mengkaji ketegangan antara tradisi clausura (klausura) Karthusian yang ketat dan rencana penyediaan hospitalitas monastik di Biara Santa Maria Scala Coeli, Évora, Portugal. Biara ini beralih dari komunitas Karthusian laki-laki, yang rahib terakhirnya pergi pada 2019, ke komunitas kontemplatif perempuan, Servidoras do Senhor e da Virgem de Matará, yang menempatnya pada 2022. Studi ini menggunakan desain kualitatif yang menggabungkan fenomenologi spasial dengan analisis naratif-institusional. Data diperoleh dari observasi lapangan terhadap kompleks biara, dokumentasi fotografis elemen arsitektural dan lanskap, serta analisis dokumen historis, arsitektural, dan institusional, termasuk pernyataan yang telah dipublikasikan tentang rencana adaptasi tersebut. Tiga temuan muncul. Pertama, arsitektur enclosure berlapis, yang secara historis dibangun untuk menolak akses eksternal, adalah struktur yang sama yang kini harus menampung ruang retreat terbatas. Kedua, disiplin temporal kehidupan Karthusian, yang berpusat pada lonceng, siklus liturgi, dan komunikasi yang terbatas, menghasilkan bentuk keheningan yang pasti akan berubah dengan kehadiran tamu. Ketiga, memori spiritual yang tertanam dalam bangunan masih sangat terasa pada 2022 meskipun fungsi sosial biara berubah, walaupun masih terbuka pertanyaan apakah komunitas baru akan mempertahankannya. Studi ini menunjukkan bahwa ketegangan antara isolasi dan keterbukaan merupakan dinamika kunci dalam transformasi ruang monastik kontemporer, dan memberikan kontribusi bagi kajian arsitektur religius, hospitalitas monastik, dan keberlanjutan komunitas kontemplatif.

Kontribusi: Studi ini mengintegrasikan analisis arsitektural, disiplin temporal, dan transformasi institusional dalam satu kerangka naratif-fenomenologis untuk menafsirkan bagaimana clausura dan hospitalitas dinegosiasikan dalam lingkungan monastik.

Kata kunci: Clausura; hospitalitas monastik; arsitektur Karthusian; Biara Scala Coeli; keberlanjutan institusional.

Abstract: This study examines the tension between the strict Carthusian tradition of clausura (enclosure) and the planned introduction of monastic hospitality at the Santa Maria Scala Coeli Monastery in Évora, Portugal. The monastery passed from a male Carthusian community, whose last monks left in 2019, to a female contemplative community, the Servidoras do Senhor e da Virgem de Matará, installed in 2022. The study uses a qualitative design that combines spatial phenomenology with narrative-institutional analysis. It draws on field observation of the monastic complex, photographic documentation of architectural and landscape elements, and analysis of historical, architectural, and institutional documents, including published statements

on the planned adaptation. Three findings emerge. First, the layered architecture of enclosure, historically built to refuse external access, is the same structure that must now accommodate limited retreat space. Second, the temporal discipline of Carthusian life, organized around bells, liturgical cycles, and restrained communication, produces a form of silence that the presence of guests will inevitably alter. Third, spiritual memory embedded in the built fabric remained strongly perceptible in 2022 even as the monastery's social function changed, although whether the new community will sustain it is an open question. The study suggests that the tension between isolation and openness is a key dynamic in the transformation of contemporary monastic space, and it contributes to research on religious architecture, monastic hospitality, and the sustainability of contemplative communities.

Contribution: The study integrates architectural analysis, temporal discipline, and institutional transformation in a single phenomenological-narrative framework for interpreting how clausura and hospitality are negotiated in a monastic environment.

Keywords: Clausura; monastic hospitality; Carthusian architecture; Scala Coeli Monastery; institutional sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, Europe has experienced a profound transformation in the function of religious spaces, particularly monasteries and contemplative communities. In Portugal, the number of priests and religious has declined steadily since the mid-twentieth century. Thousands of members of religious orders were still active in the 1960s, but the following decades brought a continuous decrease associated with secularization and demographic change (Berman, Iannaccone, & Ragusa, 2012; Mourão, 2006). This vocational crisis directly affects historic monasteries that for centuries served as centers of spiritual life, education, and culture. Many monastic complexes have closed, been converted into museums or hotels, or been transferred to communities with different spiritual orientations (Martins, Cano, & Adell, 2019).

The Santa Maria Scala Coeli Monastery in Évora (the Cartuxa de Évora) is a significant case within this context. Archbishop D. Teotónio de Bragança founded the monastery in 1587, and it opened in 1598 with the arrival of Carthusian monks from Tarragona. For centuries it remained the only male contemplative Carthusian monastery in Portugal (Abreu & Pardal, 2011; Escudero, 2011). The Carthusian tradition emphasizes strict asceticism, profound silence, and monastic isolation, and Scala Coeli functioned not only as a religious residence but as a spiritual environment that shaped distinctive contemplative practices (Devaux, 1998). After the state abolished religious orders in 1834, the monastery was secularized and temporarily served social and agricultural

purposes, until restoration efforts led by the Eugénio de Almeida family re-established it as a Carthusian house in 1960 (Pereira, 2002; Sousa, 2005). In 2019, the four remaining monks, all of advanced age, left the monastery because of the vocational crisis. On 4 September 2022, clausura resumed with the installation of a community of nuns, the Servidoras do Senhor e da Virgem de Matará, the female contemplative branch of the Religious Family of the Incarnate Word (Fundação Eugénio de Almeida, 2024; Instituto del Verbo Encarnado, 2024). For the first time, a contemplative space shaped for more than four centuries by a male community houses a female one, while the architectural configuration and the tradition of silence inherited from the Carthusians remain largely intact.

This transition raises a first question: how does religious space maintain its spirit of place amid institutional and gender change in its resident community? The question matters beyond Portugal because it concerns the relationship between sacred architecture, ascetic practice, and the sustainability of religious communities in societies shaped by secularization and changing religious practice (Casanova, 2014; McGuire, 2008).

The transition also introduces a second and less examined tension: the encounter between strict clausura and the practical need for institutional sustainability through monastic hospitality. In the Carthusian tradition, enclosure is not merely a physical boundary but a theological and spiritual principle of radical separation from the world (Devaux, 1998). Other monastic traditions, notably the Benedictine and Cistercian, have long practiced hospitality as a form of spiritual service and institutional sustainability, admitting a limited external presence into monastic space (Sousa, 2005). The planned addition of facilities that allow visitors to take part in spiritual retreats at Scala Coeli therefore sits uneasily with the Carthusian heritage of the site. The tension is not only functional but atmospheric: it asks whether the contemplative character of a space can be preserved when the boundary between inside and outside is selectively opened.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Three concepts frame the analysis. The first is *spirit of place*, the idea that architectural space carries an existential identity and meanings formed through relationships among people, environment, and cultural symbols (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). The second is *atmosphere*. Böhme (2017) argues that the emotional quality of a space

depends not only on material form but on how people experience it affectively through light, silence, rhythm, and everyday practices. The third is *lived religion*, which refers to religion enacted through daily routines, habits, and embodied experience rather than through formal doctrine alone (McGuire, 2008). Together these concepts treat monastic space as a medium connecting architectural structure with living spiritual practice, and they allow the question of continuity and change to be posed in experiential rather than purely material terms.

Research on monastic space and religious architecture has developed along three main tendencies. The first is historical-architectural analysis of building morphology, spatial organization, and style. Reveyron (2014) argues that the form of a monastery constructs ecclesial identity through stable, repetitive spatial arrangements. Destefanis (2018) examines the cloister as a space organizing relations between monks and laypeople. Pernas Alonso (2020) shows how elements such as monumental staircases embody hierarchy and rhythm in religious life, and Wang (2021) demonstrates, in a comparison of Buddhist and Cistercian monasteries, that worship spaces mediate between community, theology, and symbolic structures of power. This work offers rich typological insight but tends to treat monasteries as material artifacts and rarely explores the spiritual experience that unfolds inside them.

The second tendency is ecological-spiritual and symbolic interpretation. Sawicki (2019) reads Benedictine architecture as a bridge between spirituality and ecology, in which landscape and natural rhythms become part of practical theology. Lupu (2014) shows that monastery gardens work as symbolic thresholds between the sacred and the profane, and Markovic (2014) treats the sustainability of sacred architecture as a reflection of enduring spiritual values. This work enriches our understanding of symbolism but often remains disconnected from institutional dynamics and from the changing communities that inhabit these spaces.

The third tendency addresses historical context, gender, and adaptive reuse. Esperdy (2005) shows how the Royal Abbey of Fontevrault produced gendered space through female religious leadership, demonstrating that monastic space is never socially neutral. Erdil Dinçel (2025) analyzes sacred topography in Cappadocia as a space of hagiographic memory that shapes collective devotion. Martins et al. (2019) examine the conversion of former Cistercian monasteries in Portugal to new uses after secularization. These studies show that monastic space adapts continuously to social, political, and

economic change, but they concentrate on changes of material function or on historical and gender perspectives, and rarely ask how a religious atmosphere continues as lived practice.

The literature therefore remains fragmented across architectural analysis, ecological-spiritual symbolism, and historical adaptation. Few studies examine how a change of community, and in particular a shift from a male to a female community, affects the continuity of contemplative atmosphere in a space shaped by a specific ascetic tradition. Phenomenological designs that treat spatial atmosphere as lived religious practice are rarely applied to religious architecture. And the tension between clausura and hospitality, understood as competing institutional and atmospheric principles, remains underexplored. Scala Coeli is well suited to address these gaps: the resident community has changed without a radical change in the contemplative architecture, and the new community faces pressure to adapt through hospitality.

This study analyzes the transformation of contemplative space at Scala Coeli after the transition of its religious community. It asks:

1. How do architecture, ascetic rhythm, and silence together produce and sustain the contemplative atmosphere of the monastery?
2. What did the change of community, from a male Carthusian community to a female contemplative community, leave of that atmosphere in 2022?
3. How does the planned introduction of monastic hospitality put pressure on the Carthusian tradition of clausura, and how are the boundaries between isolation and openness being negotiated?

The working proposition guiding the analysis is that the spatial configuration inherited from the Carthusians (gates, cloisters, cells) and the ascetic rhythms of liturgical life (bells, prayer schedules, silence) sustain a contemplative atmosphere that does not depend solely on the identity of the community inhabiting the space. Hospitality, however, introduces a new negotiation between the preservation of clausura and the need for institutional sustainability.

RESEARCH METHOD

Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis is the contemplative monastic space within the Scala Coeli complex. The study focuses on the gate, church, library, small cloister, sacristy (choir

chapel), Grande Claustro, monks' cells, garden, and burial area, and on the daily practices that produce experiences of silence and isolation: clausura, bell rhythms, liturgy, bodily circulation, and communication rules. It also examines the planned functional adaptation for monastic hospitality, particularly the proposed retreat facilities. The study does not treat individuals as psychological subjects. It investigates institutional mechanisms and spatial atmosphere as they emerge from the relationship among architecture, monastic regulation, and sensory-religious experience.

Research Design

The study is qualitative and combines a spatial-phenomenological design with a narrative-institutional design. Phenomenology allows space to be interpreted as lived experience, perceived through sensory and existential engagement with the environment (Relph, 1976), and suits the study's concern with the dichotomies of sacred time and space, enclosure and isolation, and atmosphere as an expression of spirit of place (Böhme, 2017; Norberg-Schulz, 1980). The narrative-institutional design has two parts. Narrative analysis reconstructs movement through the monastery as a "spatial itinerary", capturing dimensions that technical description cannot, such as silence, rhythm, transitions of light, and the sensation of enclosure, in line with sensory approaches to place (Pink, 2015). Institutional analysis traces how decisions about hospitality and clausura are articulated and implemented in official documents and statements.

Data Sources and Collection

Primary data are field notes and photographs from direct visits to the complex. The visits took place in 2022, when the complex was partially open to the public after the departure of the Carthusian community in 2019 and before the resumption of clausura on 4 September 2022. They recorded spatial routes, architectural elements, regulatory markers (such as the "CLAUSURA" sign), liturgical objects (such as the *Liber Gradualis*), and spatial artifacts (keys, task boards, bell ropes).

Secondary data comprise scholarly literature, historical and architectural sources on the Carthusian Order and Scala Coeli (academic articles, books, catalogues, archival and institutional references), local histories, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century monographs used for historical context. Institutional documents and published statements on the transition and the planned hospitality facilities, including statements

from the Archbishop of Évora and the Fundação Eugénio de Almeida, were examined to understand the scope and rationale of the proposed adaptation.

Data were collected through five techniques: (1) Non-participant observation along the route from the entrance gate through the church, cloisters, cells, garden, and cemetery, recording circulation patterns, public-private divisions, and devices that regulate silence (bells, instruction boards, corridor structures). (2) Visual documentation of key elements of the clausura regime and contemplative design: gates, bell ropes, Carthusian keys, cloister configurations, and garden layouts. (3) Document and artifact analysis of on-site texts and inscriptions, liturgical objects, and archival catalogues and collections associated with the monastery library and manuscript heritage. (4) Analysis of institutional documents and public statements on the community transition and the planned hospitality facilities. (6) A targeted literature review on (a) spatial organization and cloister typology, (b) sacred space and atmospheric experience, (c) monasticism, ecology, and landscape, (d) gender and power in religious space, (e) monastic hospitality, and (f) the adaptive reuse of monasteries after secularization.

Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded in four stages. First, field notes and visual documentation were reduced and coded thematically around temporal rhythm (bells and liturgical schedules), mechanisms of silence (non-verbal communication and spatial separation), transitional structures (gate-corridor-cloister sequences), the relationship between architecture and ascetic practice (the cell as an "individual desert", the garden as a transitional sacred-profane space), and the emerging tension between clausura and hospitality. Second, a phenomenological-atmospheric analysis interpreted how spatial configuration, light, the sounds of water and wind, and the austerity or openness of architectural form produce experiences of enclosure and isolation as everyday religious practice. Third, a narrative analysis constructed the spatial itinerary and set it against the literature to assess whether the field findings support, revise, or extend the concepts of spirit of place, lived religion, and the clausura-hospitality tension in a monastery undergoing a male-to-female community transition after 2019. Fourth, an institutional analysis examined how the proposed hospitality adaptations relate to the historical, architectural, and spiritual principles of the Carthusian tradition.

Scope and Limits of the Evidence

The findings rest on the researcher's own observation, documentary sources, and published institutional statements. The study did not include interviews with the nuns, the Carthusian monks, or visitors, and it did not observe the daily life of the new community under resumed clausura. Statements about the experience of visitors during the open period are therefore the researcher's phenomenological interpretation, not data collected from visitors. The Carthusian daily rhythm reported in the Results is a reconstruction from documentary sources, not an observed practice. These limits are returned to in the Discussion.

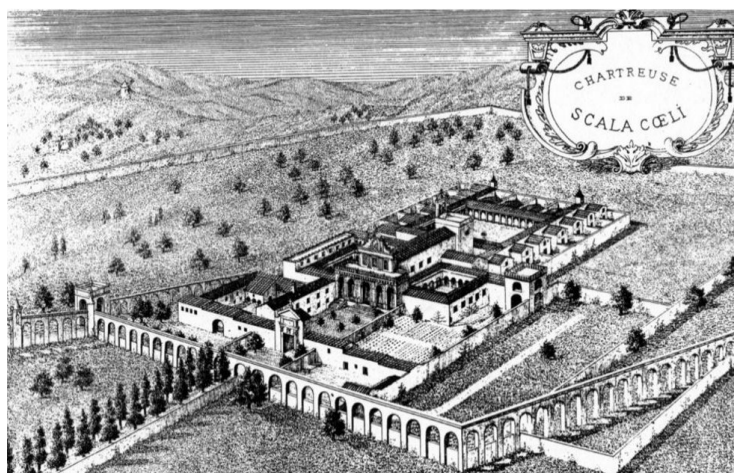
RESULTS

The results are organized around the three research questions: the spatial structure of enclosure, the temporal rhythms that produce silence, and the transition of the community and the planned introduction of hospitality. Descriptions drawn from field observation are distinguished from material drawn from documentary sources.

Spatial Structure and the Clausura Regime: Architecture as a Framework of Enclosure.

Field observation shows that Scala Coeli is organized as a layered system of enclosure that progressively separates the outside world from the inner contemplative domain. Walls, courtyards, cloistered passages, and residential units work together to regulate access and movement, creating a gradual transition from publicly approachable areas to increasingly restricted monastic zones.

Figure 1. Charterhouse of Évora restored in 1960.



The monastery appears as an integrated enclosed complex in which the church, cloistered spaces, and cells sit within a clearly demarcated architectural boundary (Figure 1).

Access to the inner domain is regulated through a sequence of thresholds. The most explicit is the second gate, a wrought-iron gate bearing the inscription "CLAUSURA" (Figure 2). It is the clearest visual boundary between the area that remained accessible and the enclosed zone, and it does more than restrict entry: it marks the passage from the outer approach to an environment governed by seclusion, silence, and controlled circulation. The gate is thus both a material and a symbolic threshold.

Figure 2. Second Gate with the "CLAUSURA" Marker.



Beyond this threshold the church is the first major interior space and the liturgical center of the complex. Its Renaissance façade is articulated in three ascending levels of columns (Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian), with a staircase leading to an open narthex supported by fluted columns (Serrão, 1999). The interior combines relative austerity with selective ornamentation, most visibly at the main altar, where a gilded *talha dourada* retable associated with the patronage of King D. João V remains in place. The organization of the church suggests differentiated liturgical zones linked to distinct monastic roles, including the separation between the monastic choir and the area used by the *conversi* (Devaux, 1998).

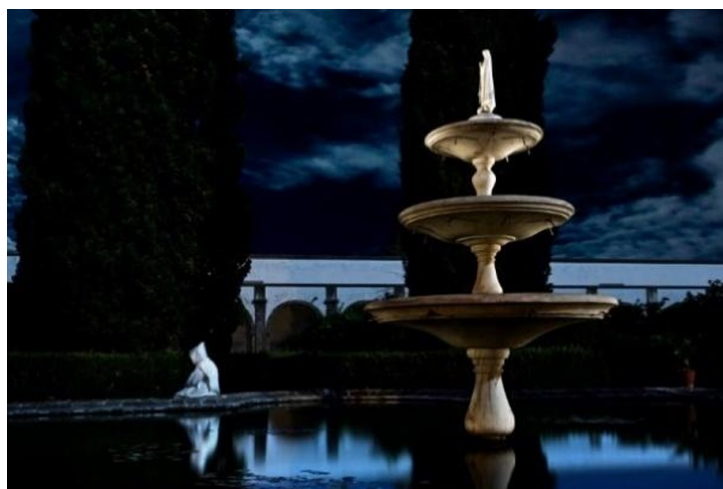
A doorway on the right side of the church leads to the library, historically associated with study and meditation. Documentary sources indicate that the library once held important manuscript and cartographic material, including *Leal Conselheiro* by King D. Duarte and atlases by Fernão Vaz Dourado, now held in the Torre do Tombo National Archive (Abreu & Pardal, 2011). In spatial terms, church and library belong to the inner

sequence of spaces that mediates movement from the entrance zone toward the more enclosed communal and residential areas.

The route then continues to the cloister system, the core of monastic circulation. Scala Coeli has two cloisters with different roles. The small cloister is a restricted communal space used for selected activities such as chapter meetings and the short conversations permitted by monastic rules; around it lie the chapter room, the refectory, and a small chapel, so this part of the complex supports limited forms of shared life. A corridor leads from it to the Grande Claustro, the most dominant spatial structure in the monastery. Each side measures approximately 98 meters, which makes it one of the largest cloisters in Portugal. Four arched galleries form a covered corridor around a central garden, and the cloister serves as the principal circulation spine, linking the church, the cells, and other communal spaces within a strongly enclosed order.

At the center of the Grande Claustro stands the fountain known as *Olho do Céu* ("Eye of Heaven"), made of three marble basins surmounted by a statue of the Virgin Mary. Eight cypress trees grow around it, and four intersecting paths bordered by trimmed *buxo* shrubs extend outward in a cross-shaped layout. The cloister is marked by the sound of water, the movement of wind, and the near absence of human voices. Sunlight entering from the open courtyard creates alternating zones of light and shadow along the covered corridor and the garden paths, contributing to an atmosphere of quiet and withdrawal (Ferro, 2019). The fountain is the visual focus of the cloister and reinforces the ordered, symmetrical composition of the garden; fountain, cypresses, and surrounding arcade work together to sustain the contemplative character of the space (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Fonte Central do Grande Claustro (Central Fountain of the Great Cloister).



One corner of the cloister garden holds the burial area known as *Casa da Eternidade* ("House of Eternity"), an enclosed space marked by a marble cross and several unnamed iron crosses. The monks' cells are the most important residential units. Scala Coeli has approximately eighteen cells arranged along the sides of the great cloister. Each has a vestibule, a *sala Ave Maria*, a bedroom, a study, and a small oratory with a genuflectory for private prayer, and at the rear a small courtyard and private garden that allow manual work within an enclosed individual setting.

The design of the cells reinforces both separation and silence. The walls of neighboring cells do not touch, because open corridors intervene, which reduces the transmission of sound. Each cell has a *ministra*, a small opening through which food can be delivered without exposing the interior. A distinctive Carthusian key was documented as part of the access system for the cell doors (Figure 4). The key and lock form part of the material system that regulates access to the enclosed residential units, and the simplicity and functional specificity of the hardware show how even small details take part in the regime of monastic separation.

Figure 4 Chave das Portas das Cartuxas (Key of the Carthusian Cell Doors).



Taken together, thresholds, liturgical space, cloister circulation, and individual cells form a graduated regime of enclosure. The monastery does not rely on a single boundary but on a layered arrangement of gates, corridors, courtyards, and residential units that progressively regulates entry, movement, and degrees of accessibility. Architecture here is not merely a container of monastic practice but a material framework that sustains silence, separation, and disciplined withdrawal. This configuration also reveals where the boundary of clausura is most explicitly marked and therefore most exposed to pressure when new forms of access are proposed.

Rhythms of Time and Ascetic Practice: The Production of an Atmosphere of Silence.

The contemplative atmosphere is shaped not only by architectural enclosure but by repetitive temporal rhythms that organize daily religious life. Sound, light, and bodily movement follow recurring patterns of liturgy, manual work, and ascetic practice (Devaux, 1998; Silva, 2000). These rhythms regulate when monks gather, withdraw, pray, work, and return to their cells, so silence at Scala Coeli was sustained through an ordered sequence of temporal practices as well as through spatial separation.

In Carthusian life, bells are the primary mechanism for regulating time. At Scala Coeli the church bell was the most regular interruption of silence, marking transitions between communal worship, prayer, and withdrawal. A bell rope hangs from the ceiling of one monastery corridor and connects directly to the bell system (Figure 5). It is material evidence of how temporal order was enacted: the rhythm of monastic activity was communicated through sound rather than speech (Silva, 2000).

Figure 5 Corda do Sino (Bell Rope in the Monastery Corridor).



Documentary sources indicate that daily life followed a highly structured liturgical schedule built on recurring cycles of prayer, withdrawal, and limited communal gathering. The monks began the day at midnight with Matins and Lauds and then returned to their cells. They gathered again for the Conventual Mass and, in the afternoon, for Vespers, spending the intervals in private prayer, reading, manual work, and rest. Monastic time was thus a disciplined order built on repeated liturgical observance and return to the cell as the primary locus of contemplation (Silva, 2000; Sousa, 2005). Table 1 presents the reconstructed rhythm. It is a reconstruction from documentary sources and not an observed schedule, and it describes the Carthusian community, not the present one.

Table 1. Reconstructed Daily Rhythm of Carthusian Life at Scala Coeli.

Time	Monastic Activity	Description
00:00	Matins and Lauds	Night office in the choir chapel
03:00	Rest	Monks return to their cells
07:00–08:00	Preparation for worship	Private prayer and meditation
±08:00	Conventual Mass	Main liturgy of the community
Morning–Afternoon	Private prayer and work	Reading, writing, gardening
±16:00	Vespers	Evening office
17:00–19:00	Personal contemplation	Prayer and meditation
±19:00	Night rest	Monks return to their cells

The schedule shows a repetitive liturgical cycle: night office, return to the cell, morning worship, work, afternoon prayer, and evening withdrawal. Communal gathering and individual seclusion alternate on a fixed rhythm, so that prayer, work, and rest are integrated into a continuous cycle of observance.

Besides bells, the regulatory system used non-verbal means of communication to coordinate daily activity without breaking silence. An instruction board in one corridor displays brief terms such as *Passeio*, *Sermão*, and *Lavagem de mãos*. It conveyed information about tasks and routines while minimizing spoken interaction, which indicates that silence was maintained not simply by the absence of speech but through material devices that allowed coordination within a regime of limited verbal exchange.

Liturgy also contributed to the temporal production of silence by regulating the acoustic environment. The *Liber Gradualis*, a book of Gregorian chants used in Catholic worship, is one of the artifacts associated with this practice (Castro, 2022; Silva, 2000). Chant was performed without instrumental accompaniment, which placed the human voice at the center of the soundscape. Sound remained limited, purposeful, and tied to specific ritual moments, so the liturgical cycle structured silence instead of interrupting it arbitrarily.

The liturgy also adjusted spatially in the later life of the community. Worship had been celebrated in the main church, but after the Carthusian return in 1960 the reduced number of monks led the community to move it to a smaller space, the former sacristy, which then served as a choir chapel. In the final years before the community closed in 2019, only four monks remained to perform the offices, so worship continued even under demographic decline (Castro, 2022; Silva, 2000).

Ascetic routine was also shaped by the surrounding Alentejo landscape. The Aqueduto da Água de Prata, the historic aqueduct that crosses the monastery's territory, historically supported the water supply needed for monastic life and agricultural work (Ferro, 2019; Mendes, 2003). It links built enclosure with the open landscape around the monastery (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Aqueduto da Agua de Prata near the Scala Coeli Monastery.



Manual labor in gardens and cultivated land formed part of the daily ascetic routine, integrated alongside prayer and withdrawal. Every Monday the monks also walked around the monastery grounds. According to historical descriptions, the walk recalled the symbolic departure of Saint Bruno and the first Carthusians from the world in search of contemplative solitude (Papasogli, 1981; Silva, 2000). Conversation was permitted in limited form during the walk, which made it a rare moment of controlled interpersonal exchange.

Silence at Scala Coeli was therefore not merely the absence of sound. It was the product of a disciplined temporal order built from bells, liturgical repetition, restrained communication, manual work, and the weekly walk. The atmosphere of silence rested on this repetitive pattern of time, sound, movement, and limited interaction as well as on architectural enclosure. It is also the dimension most directly exposed to the introduction of hospitality, because guests inevitably bring new rhythms, sounds, and patterns of movement into a space organized around the absence of an external presence.

Transition of Community and Continuity of Atmosphere: From Masculine to Feminine

After more than four centuries of male Carthusian life, the community's change in 2019–2022 is the most significant event in the recent history of the monastery. In the

Carthusian tradition, religious life develops through individual discipline and also through a monastic space configured to support silence, isolation, and intense prayer (Devaux, 1998; Silva, 2000). A change in the occupying community therefore raises the question of how far a historically formed atmosphere can persist.

In 2019 the Carthusian community left Scala Coeli after a prolonged vocational crisis. Only four monks remained, most between eighty and ninety years old, two of them responsible for domestic and internal services. This was fewer than the seven monks the Carthusian tradition requires to sustain a community (Devaux, 1998). The community returned to another Carthusian house in Spain, the Cartuja de Montalegre near Barcelona. Scala Coeli had been the only active Carthusian monastery in Portugal, so the departure ended the male Carthusian presence in the country and signaled the disappearance of one of its most rigorous contemplative traditions. The last prior has described Carthusian life as demanding an extreme degree of isolation that only a few can sustain over time, one factor in the declining number of novices in Carthusian communities across Europe.

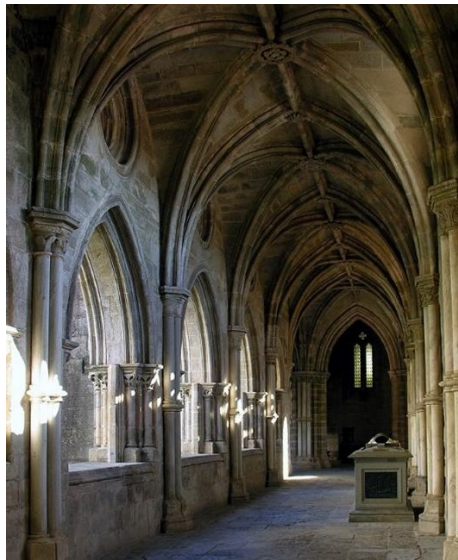
The decline in Europe does not mean the end of the order. Founded by Saint Bruno in 1084, the Carthusian Order has preserved its charism of silence, solitude, and ascetic withdrawal for more than nine centuries (Beiting, 2012; Hujanen, 2025; Peeters, 2017; Stoppa, 2021). According to *L'Osservatore Romano* (2024), it comprises 21 monasteries worldwide, 16 for monks and 5 for nuns, and at the end of 2022 counted 288 monks and 63 nuns. The tradition therefore remains institutionally sustained on a global scale as a small but durable transnational community, even though its European presence has diminished.

The departure created a transitional situation. After more than sixty years as an enclosed space almost entirely closed to the public, the complex opened temporarily and on a limited basis to visitors, and a space defined by clausura became accessible to the general public. A sign at the entrance reads "A Cartuxa não se visita" ("The Carthusian monastery is not visited"). It signals that the Cartuxa is not a conventional tourist destination but a spiritual space understood fully only through monastic life.

During this period visitors could walk through the church, cloisters, and cell corridors. In the researcher's observation, the contemplative atmosphere remained strongly perceptible even though the spaces were empty. The silence differed from that of religious buildings still in daily use, and the absence of communal activity seemed to heighten awareness of the contemplative function of the space. Sunlight on the white

walls created a strong visual atmosphere, and without occupants the long corridors, cloister gardens, and cells showed their architectural character more clearly and seemed to preserve traces of the life once lived there (Figure 7). This can be described as a sense of presence within absence. It is the researcher's phenomenological interpretation and not a finding drawn from interviews with visitors.

Figure 8. Cloister Corridor in an Uninhabited Condition.



Source: Phillip Capper, 2005.

Clausura resumed on 4 September 2022 with the installation of the Servidoras do Senhor e da Virgem de Matará (Fundação Eugénio de Almeida, 2024). The community belongs to the Religious Family of the Incarnate Word, whose official website identifies the Servidoras as its female branch (Instituto del Verbo Encarnado, 2024). Reports from 2019, citing a statement by the Archbishop of Évora, described the institute as having approximately 1,350 sisters worldwide, including a contemplative branch of about 186 nuns in 16 monasteries (Coelho, 2019). The new community is not Carthusian, so the Carthusian rhythm described above cannot be assumed to continue; its own horarium and rules of silence were not observed in this study.

Hospitality Planning and the Negotiation of Clausura

The new phase also involves relatively limited functional adaptation of the monastic space. The main planned change is the addition of hospitality facilities that will allow visitors to join spiritual retreats within the monastery for a limited period.

Hospitality has been marginal in the Carthusian tradition, which emphasizes strict isolation, although it is not entirely absent from Carthusian practice. It is common in other traditions such as the Benedictine and Cistercian, where monasteries provide retreat

space for pilgrims and visitors who wish to experience temporary spiritual life in a monastic setting (Sousa, 2005). The proposed facilities are intended to be spatially segregated from the clausura zone. The existing layered architecture of enclosure, with its sequence of gates, corridors, and cloistered passages, can accommodate a limited external presence without dissolving the boundary of clausura. The complexity of the spatial organization that historically reinforced separation may now serve as a resource for managing selective inclusion, and the "CLAUSURA" gate remains the clearest marker of the boundary, whose symbolic and functional role the proposed adaptations appear to respect.

Hospitality also opens a temporal negotiation. The Carthusian rhythm is organized around the absence of an external presence, with silence, bells, and liturgical cycles assuming a closed community. Guests, even in a segregated space, bring new patterns of movement, new sounds, and new temporal expectations that must be reconciled with the monastic schedule. The negotiation is atmospheric as well as practical, because the quality of silence at Scala Coeli depends on the consistency and predictability of its rhythms, and hospitality may subtly alter the conditions that sustain contemplative life.

Institutional statements suggest that the new community is aware of this tension. Limiting hospitality to a specific area and keeping the fundamental structure of clausura points to an attempt to balance openness and enclosure, and sustainability and fidelity to the Carthusian heritage. The balance is ongoing and not static. Its outcome will depend on how the new community inhabits the space, how visitors are integrated into the temporal and spatial order, and how the memory of Carthusian practice continues to shape the site.

The fundamental structure of the monastery has not been altered: the configuration of cloisters, cells, and enclosure system has not undergone significant change, and the proposed adjustments are functional, not structural. The architecture shows a high degree of spatial stability. A structure designed for Carthusian life appears capable of accommodating another religious community without losing the essential character of its contemplative environment. The change from a male to a female community does not, in itself, eliminate the atmosphere formed over centuries; the evidence gathered here suggests that it tends to persist through architectural configuration, spatial rhythm, and the memory of religious practice embedded in the building, while hospitality adds a new negotiation that will shape the site's future.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that the contemplative atmosphere of Scala Coeli rests on the interaction of three things: spatial enclosure, temporal discipline, and the continuity of a built environment across a change of community. The layered architecture of thresholds, cloisters, cells, and controlled circulation provides the material conditions for silence and withdrawal. A repetitive temporal order of bells, liturgical cycles, restrained communication, chant, manual labor, and ascetic routine reinforces that atmosphere. The departure of the Carthusian community and the arrival of a female community in 2022 did not, in itself, dissolve the contemplative character of the site, which in 2022 remained perceptible through the stability of the architecture and the memory of practice embedded in it. The planned hospitality introduces a tension between clausura and institutional sustainability, which the plans manage by spatially segregating hospitality functions and keeping the enclosure structure intact.

A caution is needed about what the evidence supports. The persistence of atmosphere was observed in a transitional moment, when the building stood largely empty or open to visitors, and the spatial structure was the primary evidence. How the new community lives in the space, and whether its rhythm and rules of silence reproduce the conditions that Table 1 describes for the Carthusians, were not observed. Continuity of atmosphere across the transition is therefore best read as a well-supported proposition about the stability of spatial conditions and a hypothesis about lived practice.

Dialogue with Previous Research

The findings engage the three tendencies identified in the Introduction. They support the historical-architectural tradition, in which building morphology shapes religious identity (Reveyron, 2014), the cloister is a structure organizing monastic life and its relations with the outside (Destefanis, 2018), and architectural elements reflect the rhythm of religious life (Pernas Alonso, 2020). The system of cloisters, cells, and corridors at Scala Coeli creates an enclosure that sustains contemplative life. The study extends this typological approach by adding the experiential dimension of atmosphere, produced through the interaction of architecture and lived monastic practice, and by showing that the same architecture is a resource for negotiating the tension between clausura and hospitality.

The findings relate to ecological-spiritual and socio-institutional perspectives in two ways. The garden, fountain, aqueduct, and landscape at Scala Coeli resemble the integration of spiritual life with nature and the symbolic thresholds between sacred and profane described by Sawicki (2019) and Lupu (2014), and they support Markovic's (2014) reading of sacred architecture as an expression of enduring spiritual values. On the institutional side, studies of gendered leadership and adaptive reuse (Esperdy, 2005; Erdil Dinçel, 2025; Martins et al., 2019) show that monastic spaces undergo social transformation. Scala Coeli adds a case in which institutional transformation occurs within a relatively stable spatial framework, with the change of community producing no radical change in the atmospheric structure of the space while hospitality adds a negotiation that is both spatial and temporal. The gender dimension remains thinly analyzed here. This study documents the change from a male to a female community but does not analyze whether or how gender shapes the use or interpretation of the space; the nuns are also not Carthusian, so the transition is a change of charism as well as of gender.

The findings also bear on the literature on monastic hospitality, which has given little attention to Carthusian space. Hospitality is well established in Benedictine and Cistercian traditions as spiritual service and as a means of institutional sustainability (Sousa, 2005), and has been marginal in the Carthusian tradition because of its emphasis on enclosure. At Scala Coeli, introducing hospitality is not a simple functional addition but a negotiated process that engages the architectural, temporal, and atmospheric dimensions of the monastery. This reflects a broader pattern in contemporary monasticism, in which communities must balance fidelity to a founding charism against the practical demands of sustainability in changing social and demographic contexts (Palmisano, Jonveaux, & Jewdokimow, 2021; van Tongeren, 2016).

Historical, Social, and Theological Readings

Historically, Scala Coeli reflects a Carthusian tradition that has persisted for nearly a millennium since Saint Bruno founded the order in 1084. The tradition centers on silence, solitude, and withdrawal from the world as a way to deepen the relationship with God (Beiting, 2012; Peeters, 2017). In Carthusian spirituality, monastic space is a spiritual medium supporting prayer, meditation, and theological reflection, above all in the silence of the cell (Stoppa, 2021), and the monastery is understood as a symbolic "desert" that

facilitates the search for union with God through continuous contemplative prayer (Hujanen, 2025). Hospitality brings the monastery into a new relationship with the outside world while seeking to preserve the essential conditions of that life.

Socially, monastic space forms religious communities through structured spatial and temporal discipline. Strong enclosure separates monks from the external world and also shapes a collective identity based on silence, isolation, and repeated contemplative practice. Scholars describe this organization as monastic spatial discipline, a deliberate arrangement that organizes religious life and distinguishes sacred territory from worldly space (Destefanis, 2018; Quartier, 2017). Walls, gates, cloisters, and cells act as a social device that creates symbolic boundaries between a religious community and external society and supports the continuity of shared practice (Immonen & Harjula, 2021; Smart, 2014). Hospitality modifies this function by selectively opening the boundary and turning a closed sacred territory into a space of limited encounter.

Theologically, sacred space in the monastic tradition extends beyond formal liturgical function to include experience formed through the relationship among space, time, and ascetic practice. Sacred space is commonly understood as separated from the profane world and as a locus of encounter between human beings and transcendent reality (Liutikas, 2023; Wescoat & Ousterhout, 2012), supporting contemplation and meditation as well as ritual through the interaction of architectural form, symbolism, and the rhythm of practice (Liutikas, 2025). The negotiation between clausura and hospitality is therefore a theological matter as well as a practical one: it concerns how the boundary between sacred and profane is maintained and selectively crossed.

Contributions of the Study

The study makes three contributions. First, it integrates architectural, phenomenological, and historical analysis to understand how religious atmosphere is produced and maintained in monastic space and how it is negotiated under institutional change, which typological studies that focus on physical form rarely do. Second, it shows that a change of religious community need not alter the atmospheric character of monastic space in a significant way, while the introduction of new functions such as hospitality creates tensions that call for careful spatial and temporal negotiation. Third, it proposes a narrative-institutional approach to interpreting the atmospheric experience

of contemplative space, one that reads the spatial itinerary together with the institutional decisions that shape the conditions of contemplative life.

Implications for the sustainability of monastic spaces

The vocational crisis shows that monastic communities can decline even when architectural structures remain intact. This reflects broader patterns of monastic decline tied to social change, modernization, and weakening institutional support for traditional religious life (Mourão, 2006; Palmisano, Jonveaux, & Jewdokimow, 2021). When the practices that sustain a monastery diminish, it risks functional transformation, such as closure, adaptive reuse, or spatial modification, which can alter its religious meaning (Martins et al., 2019; van Tongeren, 2016). Preservation should therefore not focus solely on conserving structures but should also consider the sustainability of the spiritual practices that animate them.

One possible strategy is spiritual hospitality, which allows limited areas of a monastery to serve as contemplative retreat space for people seeking an experience of monastic silence. Managing monastic landscapes, documenting liturgical practices, and using space for non-commercial spiritual activities can also help preserve the religious memory embedded in monastic structures. Such strategies protect the architectural heritage and the spiritual function that keeps these spaces meaningful. As Scala Coeli shows, though, they must be implemented with close attention to the spatial and temporal boundaries that sustain contemplative life, so that hospitality does not dissolve the atmospheric conditions that make the monastery a place of spiritual significance.

Limitations

The study has four main limitations. It relies on the researcher's observation during a transitional period and on documentary sources, without interviews with the nuns, former monks, or visitors. It did not observe the daily life of the new community under resumed clausura. The Carthusian rhythm is reconstructed from documents. And the analysis of the hospitality plan depends on published statements and not on the planning documents themselves, so the proposed facilities, their location, and their governance are only partly known.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how the contemplative atmosphere of the Santa Maria Scala Coeli Monastery is sustained, and how it is being renegotiated, after the transition from a male Carthusian community to a female contemplative community and under the planned introduction of monastic hospitality. Three conclusions follow. First, the monastery's layered architecture of enclosure materially supports silence, separation, and withdrawal. Second, that atmosphere is not produced by space alone: bells, liturgical cycles, chant, restrained communication, manual labor, and the weekly walk structure the experience of monastic time. Third, the departure of the Carthusians in 2019 and the installation of a new community in 2022 did not by themselves dissolve the contemplative character of the site, which appears to persist through the stability of the architecture and the memory of practice embedded in it. Hospitality introduces a new negotiation between the preservation of clausura and the demands of institutional sustainability, managed spatially through the segregation of hospitality functions and temporally through the continuing adaptation of monastic rhythms.

For the study of religious architecture, the research offers an integrated approach linking architectural analysis, temporal discipline, and lived practice, and a reading of monasteries as environments in which spiritual memory, embodied practice, and atmospheric experience remain intertwined and in which the boundary between isolation and openness is continuously negotiated. Future research should compare monasteries across traditions, study the lived practices of the new community at Scala Coeli as hospitality is implemented (including through interviews with the nuns and with visitors), examine how gender shapes the use and interpretation of the space, and explore how continuity and change of sacred atmosphere work at other religious sites undergoing institutional transition.

REFERENCES

- Abreu, L., & Pardal, R. (2011). *A memória histórica do convento da Cartuxa de Santa Maria Scala Coeli através da sua documentação*. Fundação Eugénio de Almeida.
- Beiting, C. J. (2012). Carthusians. In *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization* (pp. 1–2). <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470670606.wbecc0242>
- Berman, E., Iannaccone, L. R., & Ragusa, G. (2012). From empty pews to empty cradles: Fertility decline among European Catholics. *NBER Working Paper*, No. W18350.

- Böhme, G. (2017). *Atmospheric architectures*. Bloomsbury Academic.
<https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474258111>
- Casanova, J. (2014). *Public religions in the modern world*. University of Chicago Press.
- Castro, M. J. (2022). Viagem pictórica religiosa. *Biblos*, 8, 119–144.
https://doi.org/10.14195/0870-4112_3-8_6
- Coelho, F. S. (2019). Évora: Vida contemplativa vai continuar na Cartuxa com uma comunidade feminina. *Agência Ecclesia*. <https://agencia.ecclesia.pt/portal/evora-vida-contemplativa-vai-continuar-na-cartuxa-com-uma-comunidade-feminina/>
- Destefanis, E. (2018). Around the cloister: Spaces for monks and spaces for laymen in the early medieval monasteries. *Hortus Artium Mediaevalium*, 24, 396–416.
<https://doi.org/10.1484/J.HAM.5.115967>
- Devaux, A. (1998). *L'architecture dans l'Ordre des Chartreux*. La Grande Chartreuse.
- Erdil Dinçel, T. (2025). Inscribed devotion: Hagiographic memory, monastic space, and sacred topography in Cappadocia's rock-cut churches. *Religions*, 16(10), 1233.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16101233>
- Escudero, J. M. (2011). *As cartuxas de Portugal através dos séculos: Crónicas das cartuxas portuguesas*. Universität Salzburg.
<https://doi.org/10.34632/lusitaniascara.2012.6698>
- Esperdy, G. (2005). The Royal Abbey of Fontevrault: Religious women and the shaping of gendered space. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 6(2), 59–80.
- Ferro, L. (2019). *O Eremitério da Cartuxa de Évora: Arquitectura e vida monástica*. Canto Redondo.
- Fundação Eugénio de Almeida. (2024). Mosteiro de Santa Maria Scala Coeli.
<https://www.fea.pt/patrimonio/mosteiro-de-santa-maria-scala-coeli>
- Hujanen, R. (2025). Silent witnesses and intercessors: Monastic contribution in the poetry of a Carthusian monk. *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 90(3), 296–313.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00211400251342268>
- Immonen, V., & Harjula, J. (2021). Something distinct, or business as usual? Interpreting the plan of the late medieval Bridgettine monastery in Naantali, Finland. *Religions*, 12(6). <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12060432>
- Instituto del Verbo Encarnado. (2024). A Família Religiosa do Verbo Encarnado.
<https://ive.org/ssvm-por/>

- L'Osservatore Romano. (2024). Five monasteries in the world, 63 nuns, when once they were just 49 and in silence, the Carthusians grow.
<https://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/2024-06/dcm-006/and-in-silence-the-carthusians-grow.html>
- Liutikas, D. (2023). Sacred space in geography: Religious buildings and monuments. In *Springer Geography* (pp. 77–112). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-32209-9_5
- Liutikas, D. (2025). Religious geography and sacred landscape: An introduction to the research area. In *Geographies of religious spaces and sacred landscapes* (pp. 1–20). <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035343829.00005>
- Lupu, O. P. (2014). Christian monastery gardens: A symbiotic interpretation between piety and aesthetics. *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 10(3), 199–207.
- Markovic, G. (2014). Sustainable architecture of the holy place. In *14th International Multidisciplinary Scientific GeoConference SGEM 2014* (pp. 645–650).
- Martins, A. M. T., Cano, M. T. P., & Adell, E. M. (2019). Monastic buildings: A review about new uses on former monasteries. The Portuguese Cistercian case. *IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering*, 471, 082037.
<https://doi.org/10.1088/1757-899X/471/8/082037>
- McGuire, M. B. (2008). *Lived religion: Faith and practice in everyday life*. Oxford University Press.
- Mendes, S. (2003). *Convento da Cartuxa*. Fundação Eugénio de Almeida.
- Mourão, P. R. (2006). Why is the number of Catholic priests diminishing in Portugal? Analysis of the period 1960–2002. *Regional and Sectoral Economic Studies*, 6(2), 43–56.
- Norberg-Schulz, C. (1980). *Genius loci: Towards a phenomenology of architecture*. Rizzoli.
- Palmisano, S., Jonveaux, I., & Jewdokimow, M. (2021). *The transformation of religious orders in Central and Eastern Europe: Sociological insights*. Taylor & Francis.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429340208>
- Papasogli, G. (1981). *Deus responde no deserto: Bruno, o Santo da Cartuxa*. Livraria Apostolado da Imprensa.
- Peeters, T. (2017). Love and silence: Jean-Baptiste Porion and Carthusian theology. *Tijdschrift voor Theologie*, 57(4), 361–373.
<https://doi.org/10.2143/tvt.57.4.3262789>

- Pereira, S. (2002). O restauro da Cartuxa de Évora pelos condes de Vill'Alva (1942–1960). *Eborensia: Revista do Instituto Superior de Teologia de Évora*.
- Pernas Alonso, I. (2020). The Grand Staircase in San Xoan de Poio Monastery. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-47979-4_39
- Pink, S. (2015). *Doing sensory ethnography*. SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473917057>
- Quartier, T. (2017). Monastic culture between structure and antistructure: Liturgical form-of-life in the perspective of monastic studies. *Questions Liturgiques*, 98(1–2), 18–40. <https://doi.org/10.2143/QL.98.1.3275140>
- Relph, E. (1976). *Place and placelessness*. Pion.
- Reveyron, N. (2014). Forma monasterii: Essai sur l'organisation de l'espace monastique comme mise en forme de l'identité ecclésiologique. *Hortus Artium Medievalium*, 20(2), 439–447. <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.HAM.5.102661>
- Sawicki, B. (2019). Monastic architecture as a bridge between ecology and spirituality: A case study of a Benedictine monastery in Clerlande, Belgium. In *A visual approach to the study of religious orders: Zooming in on monasteries* (pp. 106–120). Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429032103-6>
- Serrão, V. (1999). Um desenho de Fernão Gomes para o Mosteiro da Scala Coeli de Évora. *Monumentos: Revista Semestral de Edifícios e Monumentos*, 10, 30–37.
- Silva, E. (2000). *Solidão, silêncio e presença: Aproximação teológico-espiritual a partir de S. Bruno*. Gráfica de Coimbra.
- Smart, A. (2014). Bede, Wearmouth-Jarrow and sacred space. *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 14(1), 22–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2014.883476>
- Sousa, B. (2005). *Ordens religiosas em Portugal*. Livros Horizonte.
- Stoppa, M. (2021). The monastic Carthusian space. In *Key challenges in geography* (pp. 261–276). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-74590-5_12
- van Tongeren, L. (2016). Visiting abbeys: Changing monastic identities and the attraction of abbeys. In *Monasticism in modern times* (pp. 79–98). Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315595986>
- Wang, W. (2021). Comparative review of worship spaces in Buddhist and Cistercian monasteries: The three temples of Guoqing Si (China) and the church of the Royal

Abbey of Santa Maria de Poblet (Spain). *Religions*, 12(11), 972.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110972>

Wescoat, B. D., & Ousterhout, R. G. (2012). *Architecture of the sacred: Space, ritual, and experience from classical Greece to Byzantium*. Cambridge University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139017640>