

# Ghost storeys

Amelia Tavella Architectes weaves metal with stone, and past with present, in the part-ruined Saint-François Convent in southern Corsica, writes *Nina Bouraoui*





**I**t is not we who build our country, but our country that builds us. We cannot separate ourselves from geography, the rooms in which we construct our lives. I believe in the power of places over beings. I believe in the magnetism of a space that changes minds. Some spaces are more powerful than others; I believe in their gift of 'absorption'. Corsica has always had this effect on me, because it is an island, because from an aeroplane it looks like the body of a woman lying on the Mediterranean Sea, because it resuscitates my Algerian roots. Its beauty connects me to the splendours of my childhood, which made me so melancholy even as I admired them. I could not reach them, but they lifted me up; through them I learned grace and I will always recognise this.

These are my thoughts on the plane that takes me to Ajaccio, before I go on to Sainte-Lucie-de-Tallano. Alone above the clouds, it feels as if I am leaving France. I love the pride of the Corsican people. I love their false sternness and their way of giving their heart over entirely once you have won their trust. I love their desire for freedom. I love that they teach me how to love them. Perhaps beauty is earned. Maybe it dictates its own order, its own law, and you either bow to it or leave.

My route takes me further south by car, towards the warm, wild, steep region of Alta Rocca, before reaching Sartène. I keep my distance from the sea – a territory in its own right – defensive and protective waters that guard the island, watching over its inhabitants. It is now just a rumour;

distant, imaginary. I hear the fo mountains, chained to one another, a crazy and hypnotic merry-go-round. The ridges, the valleys, the scrub and the hollows are transformed to the light. Everything is red, and crimson. The peaks capture the Water slides into the furrows. I kings. Here the earth bleeds, not pungent. So many rocks, so many So much roughness and sweetness. The children come to visit the entire villages. So many happy lives metamorphoses. Everything must unfold. I am in the belly of Corsica. Like the island, the village of Sainte-Lucie-de-Tallano is protected. Not by the sea, but by the land itself of resistance, fervent and free. I



Corsican village is situated around a bend, with its granite buildings, century-old trees and olive groves. Perched at an altitude of 450m, it overlooks the valley and offers magnificent views of the intertwining mountain ranges. Locals meet at the bar or in the shaded village square, with its drinking fountain, to chat or play.

All you have to do is look to the sky and you are greeted by an apparition: the Saint-François Convent, recently restored by Amelia Tavella Architectes, sits on a promontory. An olive grove encircles it from beneath, a vegetal and sensual collar. Further along, the village cemetery sleeps, an extension of stones and peace. The convent is alone, erected towards the Most High. It was once a 15th-century castle before it was occupied by monks

who believed that faith embraces humans and nature equally. How not to hear their prayers when the monks are no longer there? The convent rustles, whispers and quivers. The ground has held their voices. A deserted but living kingdom, a sacred place open to everyone, the convent invites us to kneel in honour of the invisible, to clasp our hands and, eyes closed, to make a wish. I believe in the power of spaces because I believe in the memories they keep.

The Franciscan monks fled the Genoese invasion of the convent in the 16th century. After the French Revolution, the monument was sold and shared between several neighbouring municipalities. However, disagreements between the owners resulted in the dismantling of one of the wings to sell its materials. Under the



**(previous spread)**  
**Originally a castle built in 1480, the Saint-François Convent, now a cultural centre, sits on a promontory overlooking the granite buildings of Sainte-Lucie-de-Tallano. Savaged by both the ravages of time and the dismantling of a wing for materials, the convent has been reborn as a site for cultural meetings, exchanges and exhibitions. The phantom wing has been sheathed in a copper mantle (left) to become the Maison du Territoire. The metal captures and reflects light. Perforations in the copper filter light through into the restored interior (opposite)**

‘A convent not modified, but rather reconstituted according to the original forms and imprints of the past’

rains, the storms, the snows of winter and the fires of summer, the Saint-François Convent has suffered the work of time, which loosens the stones without destroying them entirely. To put an end to its degradation, in 1927 the convent and church were registered in the Inventaire Supplémentaire des Monuments Historiques (Supplementary Inventory of Historic Monuments). Broken, scattered, fossilised, the building waited a long time before being reassembled by Tavella's eccentric yet considered audacity.

In 2014, the Corsican architect was invited to participate in a competition for the renovation and transformation of the convent into a Maison du Territoire, a site of cultural meetings, exchanges and exhibitions. The Saint-François Convent

now exists in two parts. The first was restored from the original imprint. The second – a ghost of what once stood – wears a copper robe, sparkling, magical. Attached to the stone like a graft, the copper conveys the convent's lost force and infuses it with a vivifying blood red. Without disturbing that which once was, and yet embedded into the original structure, the addition stands as if it had always existed, magnifying the sacred.

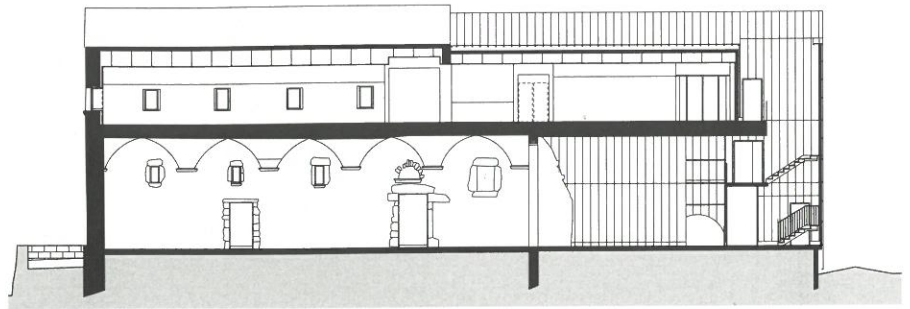
Copper, a precious material, acts delicately and captures the light that the stone lacked, nourishing at once the building and the fig tree that has grown inside – a final inhabitant, an expression of nature seeking to regain the upper hand over this abandoned building.

This natural fortification of branches

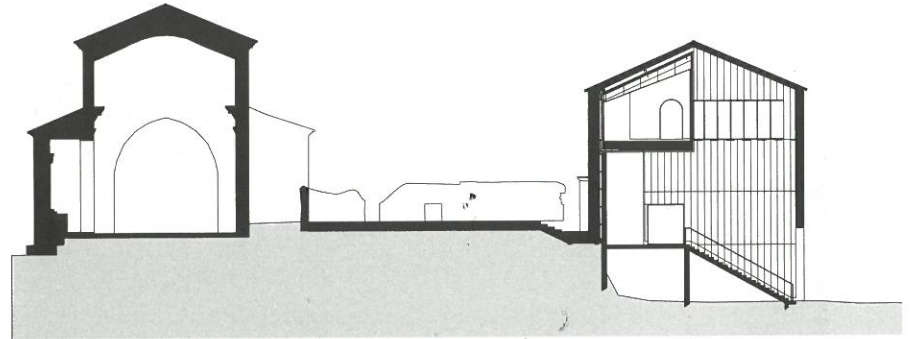
participates in the support of the building, acting as armature and poetic defence, the hidden backbone of an untouchable place that Tavella has brought back to life and celebrated, with an awareness of the monks watching over every gesture from the beyond. Without compromise, the architect has followed her own specifications: her passion for her island, her respect for its history. Influenced by nature and by a concern for ethics, for the protection of Corsica, her vision is above all ecological and honours its memory. Nothing should offend or betray the past.

The convent has become cathedral-like. Light filters into the interior of the building through the perforated copper skin, which act like stained-glass windows, dispersing the rays of the sun and the telluric force of





section BB



section AA

**The *mashrabiya* (above) acts in the same way as a stained-glass window, infusing the interior with the sun's rays. Large timber doors can also be opened to flood the space with light (opposite)**



the Alta Rocca. Classified as a historic monument, the interior has been faithfully restored in stone and brick, and now houses a media library, a room for cultural activities and adjoining premises. The vaults shelter both those who believe and those who do not believe, uniting them in the name of beauty and of invasive nature, brought back to this place where everyone can write their story.

Outside, at the level of the convent's north wing extension, the copper layer added by Tavella is no second skin. So grounded and enveloped in stone, it says as much of the past as of the present. Its texture possesses the nobility of what was, honouring the ruins to which it is attached both physically and spiritually; against this skin rebound bursts of sunlight, bursts of

nature, bursts which invite themselves to the heart of the convent, radiating a closed space which suddenly seems to widen. The copper will acquire a patina; like a ruin, it is the expression of passing time.

Tavella does not undo: she restores, recomposes, is inspired by what has been. It is similar to the work of the archaeologist who searches in the traces of the past for a meaning to our present - we who lose ourselves in the race for happiness, a race that is frantic and rarely won. We have forgotten that our memories are born of the memories of those who precede us. We have forgotten that the stones keep their secrets, secrets that we will keep in our turn, and then pass on. Above the village of Tallano, time is made eternal by this convent - a convent not modified, but rather

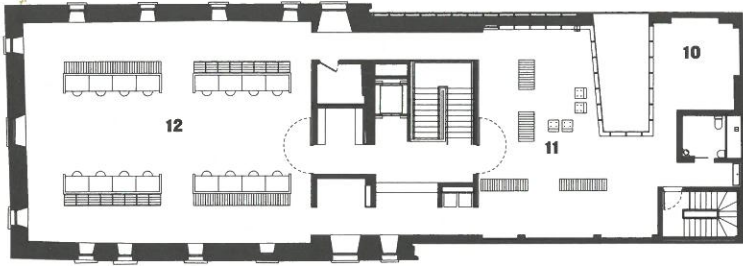
reconstituted according to the original forms and imprints of the past.

The restoration represents a revival but also a tribute to the heritage, to the history of this site. Today, the convent brings a new touristic dimension to this magical place, which was already defined by tourism linked to agriculture and to the nearby Caldane baths.

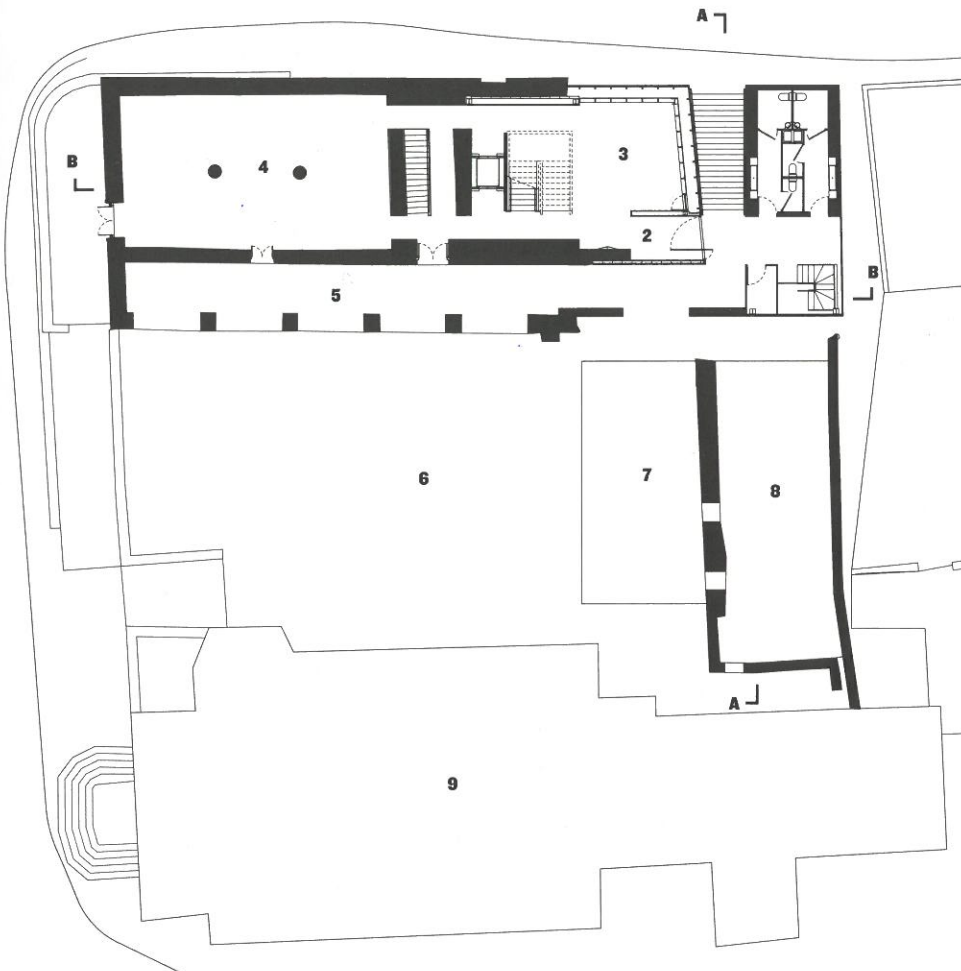
At night, the Saint-François Convent faces the mountains, a dizzying and sometimes threatening setting, no longer lonely or isolated. The site has awoken, rising like a body in the storm - neither wind nor cold will make it tremble. Upright, just and glorious, watchful and protective, it awaits those who seek, and those who have already found.

*Translated by Jezebel Mansell*

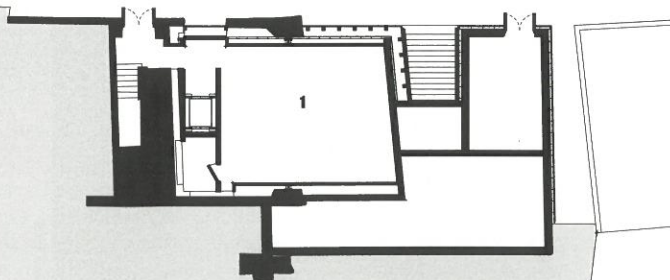
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first floor



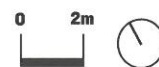
ground floor



lower ground floor plan



- 1 exhibition space
- 2 public entrance
- 3 activity room
- 4 gallery
- 5 cloisters
- 6 spectator area
- 7 stage
- 8 backstage
- 9 church
- 10 children's area
- 11 media library
- 12 reading room





**Old and new, past and present, the religious and the secular, all peacefully co-exist in the age-old mountains of southern Corsica. The copper will gradually take on a patina too and betray the passing of time**



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