

Living with the Land at The Hotel du Couvent

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Living with the Land at The Hotel du Couvent

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My studio and I have been working since 2014 to rehabilitate a former 7,500m² convent from the early 17th century, which had been abandoned since the 1980s. After years of dedicated effort—both physical and mental—it finally opened as *Hotel du Couvent* in June 2024.

The first few years were spent immersed in archival research, uncovering the history of this little-known convent and its terraced gardens, hidden in the heart of Nice. We delved deeply into the daily lives of the Visitandine nuns who once lived there—a journey that eventually led us to meet the last surviving nun from the convent.

Sœur Marie Chantal was more than just a welcoming figure; she became a crucial part of the project during a difficult time. When legal issues and the challenges of COVID brought our work to a standstill, her letters arrived as a sort of blessing. Although she moved to another convent, she had kept all the newspaper articles about our project and sent us thoughtful letters. Accompanied by historical photos, they offered fragments of the past, glimpses into the lives of the nuns who had once inhabited this space.



Fig. 1-2. Sœur Marie Chantal receiving us in her current convent, showing her collection of articles about the project

Her letters did more than just inform us—they helped us stay connected to the essence of the place. Thanks to her, we could maintain the spirit of the convent, which influenced the design—focusing on light, tranquility, and meditation, elements that the nuns had fostered over the centuries.

One day, another letter arrived. It included original plans for the West Wing of the complex, showing that it had once been taller before its reconstruction. This discovery allowed us to demonstrate that an elevation was possible, providing the additional space necessary to meet the project's requirements while respecting the original architecture.

Sœur Marie Chantal's unwavering support—both practical and emotional—was vital in keeping the project alive during uncertain times. Her contributions allowed us to remain rooted in the convent's true spirit, gently guiding us as we worked to restore and honor its legacy.

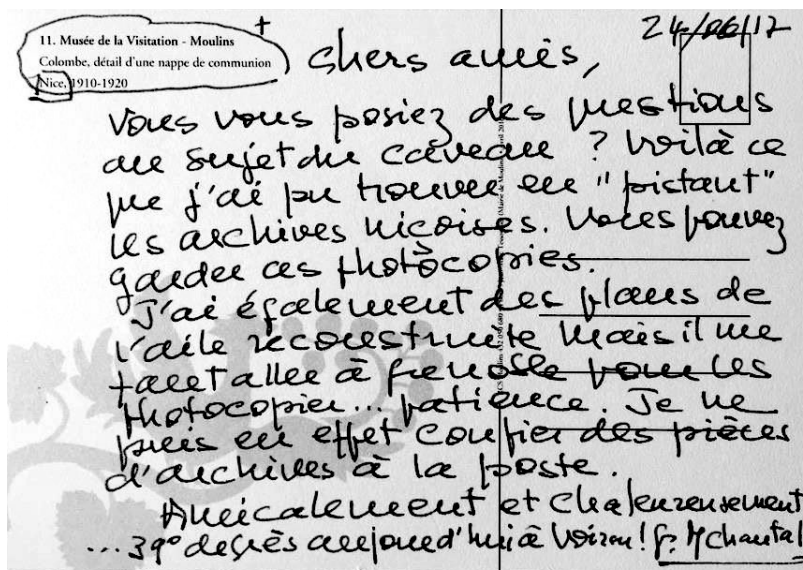


Fig. 3. One of the touching letters sent to us by Soeur Marie Chantal.

Fig. 4. Soeur Marie Chantal visiting the convent during our project for the first time since she moved away.

To fully understand the space, I decided to live in the abandoned convent during the research phase. This wasn't just about being present—it was about experiencing the land and the building intimately, feeling its rhythms, and learning from it. I gathered a team of students who also became immersed in the space, some even moving in to study the site more deeply. Together, we explored the convent's history, architecture, and unique atmosphere, in the most direct way possible.



Fig. 5-6-7-8. The different ways we lived with the building and its spirit.

Around this time, I came across the story of Black Mountain College, an experimental institution that blended art, community, and progressive education. The spirit of this school struck a chord with me and served as a profound source of inspiration. It reinforced my belief that our project could go beyond restoration—it could become a place of creativity, learning, and shared experience. We adopted some of that ethos, blurring the lines between research, habitation, and collective experimentation.

We invited master craftsmen to hold workshops, seeking to learn about the tactile, often overlooked aspects of building. These experts—Rudolf Krebs, a Swiss lime master; Philippe Morier Genou, a French biologist and water filtration specialist; Nicolas Meunier, a

French rammed earth expert; and Jochen Kafer Haus, a German natural ventilation specialist—shared their knowledge, allowing us to experience firsthand the physical and mental effort involved in sustainable building.



Fig. 9 to 12. Pictures from the on-site workshop on lime with Ruedi Kreb

In addition to this, we engaged in many hands-on experiments: papermaking with the residue from our printing, creating plaster lamps from flower pots, ceramics made with earth from the site, and building with quicklime mortar. We even had an apprentice chef who cooked for us every evening, creating a shared sense of community through meals prepared together. This collective effort was an essential part of the experience, bonding us to the land and to each other.



Fig. 13 to 18. Life at the convent : recycled paper making and lamp crafting.

As we worked and lived there, we constantly engaged with the spaces, creating 1:1 mockups, drawing the landscape on the wall hoping that one day there would be a window instead, and exploring each room as if it were a living organism. We inhabited these spaces, not just as professionals but as **living beings** invested in understanding this space essence. Our office was set up in the garden terraces, and the land itself became our studio. Every step we took was about truly *living* with the space—both physically and spiritually.

One of the most striking aspects of the convent was its historic vegetable garden. Using archival drawings and early 20th-century photographs, we identified its original location. Overrun by wild brambles and undergrowth, the garden had been forgotten, but with collective effort, we began clearing the land. The physical work was challenging, but it was also deeply rewarding. As we dug, we uncovered traces of terracotta borders and an ancient water drainage system that once nourished the garden, reminding us that we were part of something much larger than our project.



Fig. 19 to 22. Shaping the Hotel du Couvent at 1:1 scale.



Fig. 23-24. Historical pictures of the vegetable garden of the convent.

Eventually, after months of dedicated effort, we succeeded in restoring a small yet vibrant patch of land where vegetables, herbs, and fruit trees could once again grow. What began as a tangled and overgrown plot slowly transformed into a flourishing garden, nurtured by careful observation, trial and error, and an enduring sense of purpose. The produce we cultivated—tomatoes, courgettes, mint, basil, figs, and more—soon became central to our daily rhythm. We used these fresh ingredients to prepare shared lunches and dinners, which became meaningful rituals that brought our team together. These meals weren't just about nourishment; they became moments of exchange, reflection, and celebration, reinforcing a sense of belonging and community among those working on the site. As I was reading about BMC at the same time, the connection became even more obvious.

As we continued our historical research and architectural work, this hands-on connection to the land added a new dimension to the project. The garden became both a literal and symbolic space—bridging past and present, research and practice, memory and renewal. This living experiment greatly informed the design of the permanent vegetable garden that now forms part of the Hôtel du Couvent. Working closely with our landscape designers, project team, and our client, we translated these early experiments into a carefully considered plan for a garden that would be both productive and poetic—an integral part of the hotel's identity and guest experience.



Fig. 25 to 31. Bringing the vegetable garden back to life with the Studio team and the enjoying it!

Since the hotel's opening in June 2024, the garden has continued to thrive. What once lay dormant is now a lush, living ecosystem providing a generous variety of herbs, fruits, and vegetables. These are used in herbal teas, natural infusions, house-made wellness products, and fresh seasonal dishes served in the hotel's restaurant. Even the bar draws from the garden—fresh sprigs of thyme, lemon verbena, and rosemary are used to craft cocktails that carry the scent and spirit of the place. This daily connection to the land has not only added depth to the guest experience, but has also honored the original self-sustaining practices of the convent, bringing them gently into a contemporary context.

I hope that the following photographs offer more than just a visual record of this transformation. I hope they capture a sense of what it has meant to live with this place over the past ten years—to care for it, to learn from it, and to participate in its rebirth. In many ways, this project has been as much about living with the land, and nurturing the land as it has been about allowing it to teach us something in return.

Louis-Antoine



Fig. 32 to 34. Scattered fragments of 10 years of living with the project.



Fig. 35 to 41. Life at the *Hotel du Couvent* nowadays.