

What is conversion?

conversion konv<e>;rS<e>n. [a. *Fr. conversion*, ad. *L. conversion-em* turning round, n. of action from *convertere* to turn round.

I. Turning in position, direction, destination.

a. The action of turning round or revolving; revolution, rotation.

Obs

b. The action of turning to a particular direction; turning. *Obs.*

c. *fig.* The action of turning or directing (one's mind, attention, actions, etc.) *to* some object. *Obs.*

II. Change in character, nature, form, or function.

a. The action of turning, or process of being turned, *into* or *to* something else; change of form or properties, alteration.

III. The bringing of any one over to a specified religious faith, profession, or party, esp. to one regarded as true, from what is regarded as falsehood or error. (Without qualification, usually = **conversion** to Christianity.) c. *spec.* In the mediæval church: Change from the secular to the `religious' life; entry into monastic life; When an individual converts into another religion, beliefs, moral and ethical values from the old religion will still remain and new ones will be added. Conversion is a synthesis rather than a juxtaposition of beliefs.

IV. Building. The structural adaptation of a building for a new purpose.

"Places we remember and places we anticipate are mingled in the present time. Memory and anticipation, in fact, constitute the real perspective of space, giving it depth."

Aldo Van Eyck.

"Out of the encounter between old envelope and new requirements and means, a unique object will be born-one which is no mere juxtaposition, but a synthesis from the point of view of both construction and architecture."

Claude Soucy

Conversion is the architectural instrument that synthesizes memory and anticipation, old envelope and new requirement, magic and reality. It involves digging into the past of the building in order to architecturally reveal its history and prolong its life.

Why am I doing it?

Conversion is the only genuine and healthy way of working with existing structures.

It brings us face to face with history, and this contact creates novel architecture. The constraints become stimuli to the imagination they enable architectural solutions to be developed, which would never have been invented from scratch.

Intentions

Prolonging life of the building by the re establishment of its corporate body

(The essential feature of corporate bodies was not that they were a plurality of persons collected in one body, but that they were plurality in succession, making them immortal)

Using essential elements of Havana architecture. Follow structure of the place (Snozzi).

Working elegantly with fragments.(like Scarpa)

Being simple, clear, and transparent when designing.

Designing to recognize rather than to transform (Snozzi).

The Conversion

My first drawing relates my concept of what a school of architecture should be, with the floor plan of the convent. The fundamental principle of this school is the teaching theory, as well as practice. This principle links the new program with the Franciscan monk's dictum "Ora et Labora" (Work and Pray). The convent plan consists in two worship spaces (basilica and chapel) and two cloisters, (North and South). This duality was ideal for the new program.

The Androgyny Rebis, image taken from the book *Aurora Consurgens*, was used by the alchemist to represent the relationship theory-practice in their discipline. Rebis is a Siamese twin, female and male, joined by the stomach. The female holds a bat in her hand while the male holds a hare. The bat creature from the air represents the volatile (theory). The hare represents the terrestrial (practice).

By superimposing the Rebis and the floor plan, I was able to program the building. The theoretical body, basilica and north cloister will hold studios, jury room, classrooms, exhibition spaces, and library. The practical body, chapel and south cloisters will house wood and metal shops, offices, etc. Both theoretical and practical bodies were mutilated. Theory was missing its head and practice one arm; hence, these missing limbs were recreated as a jury room and metal shop respectively.

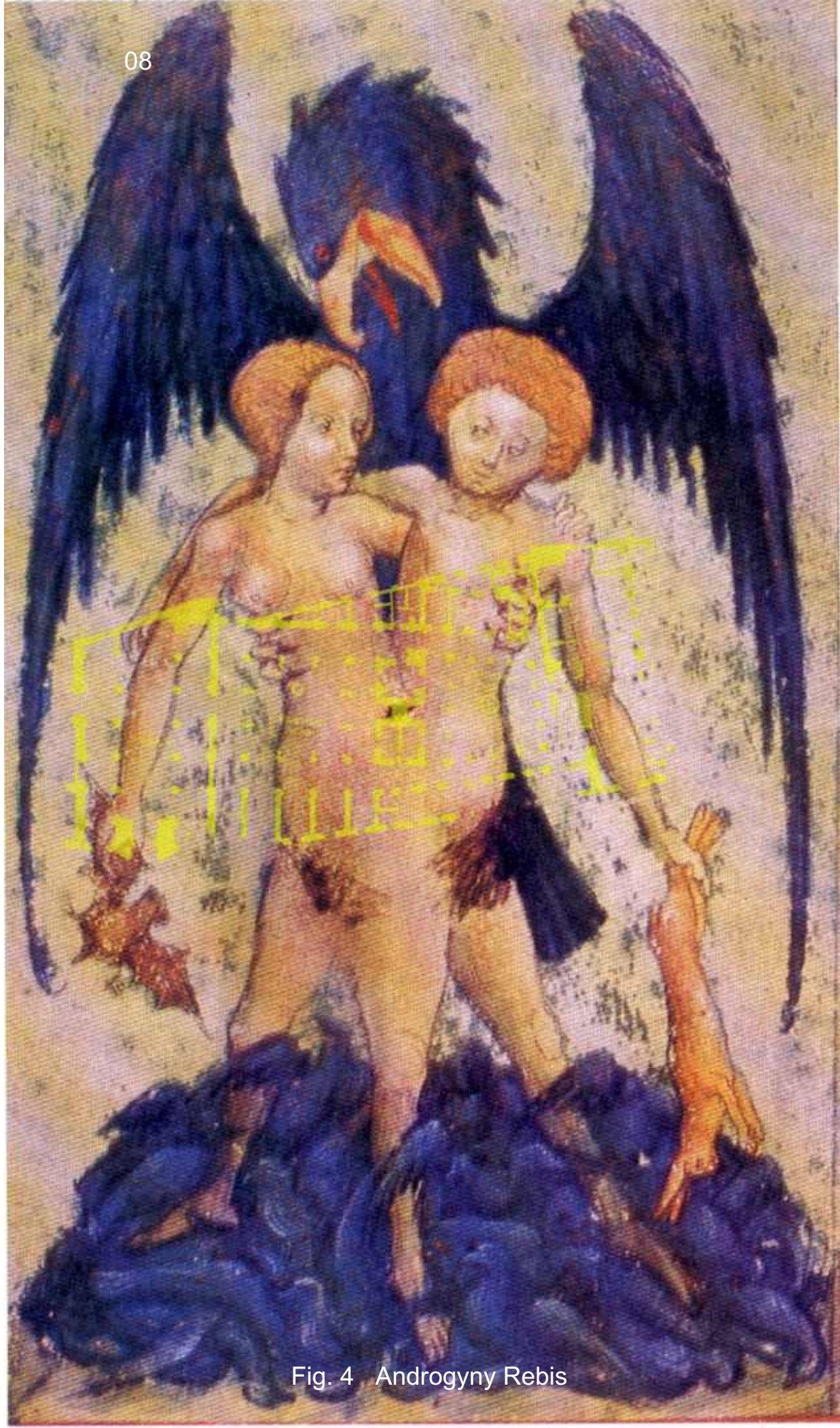


Fig. 4 Androgyny Rebis

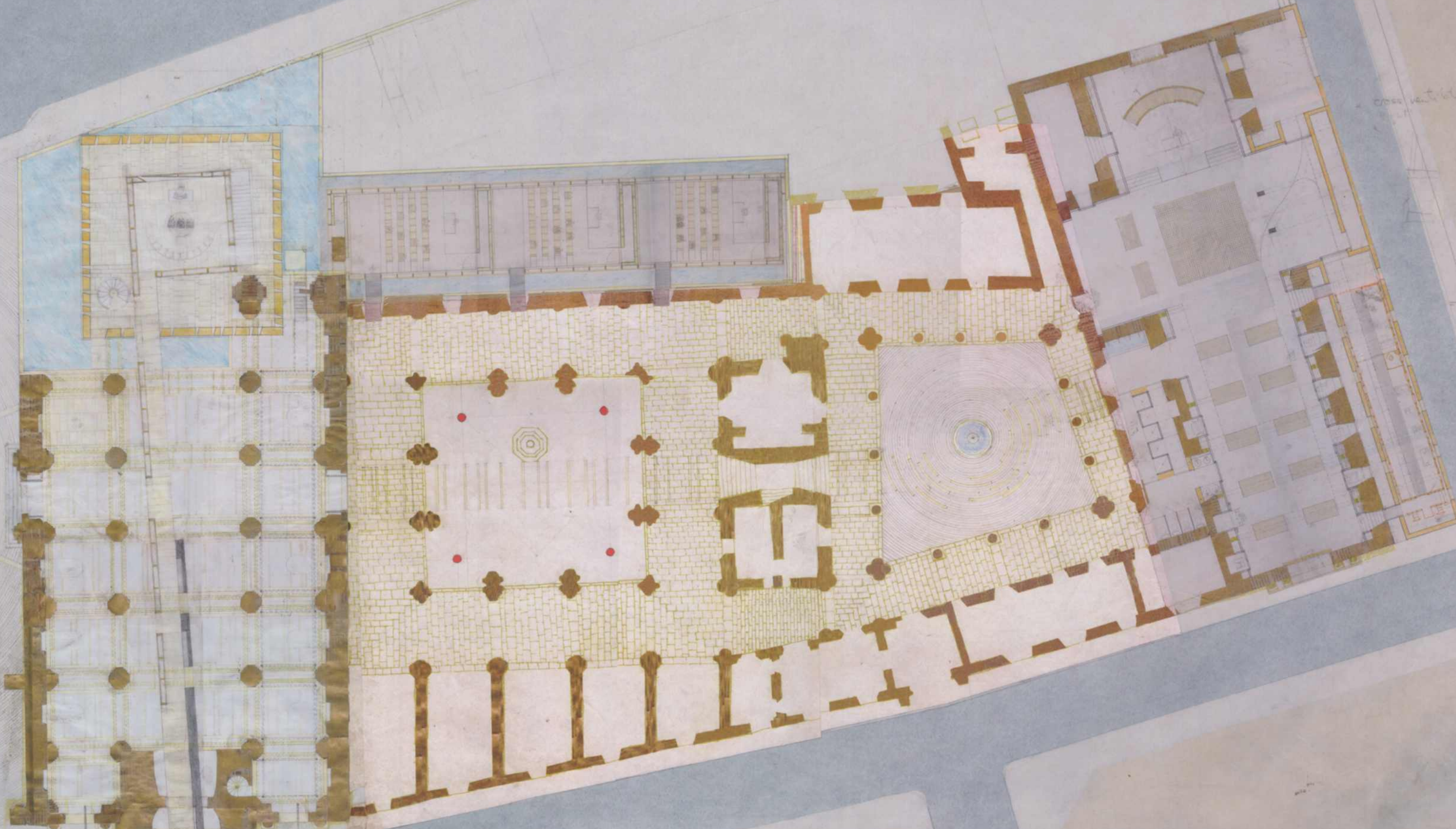


Fig. 6 Site Plan

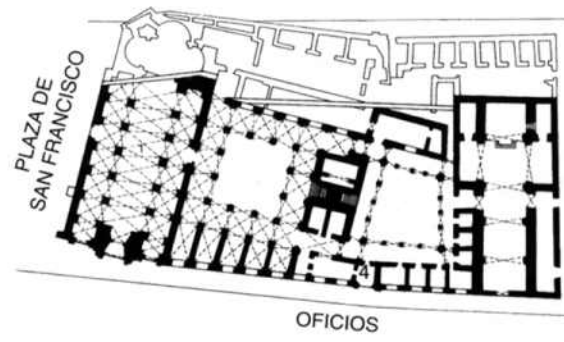


Fig. 5 Perimeter views

Body of Practice

The chapel of the third order had suffered major mutilations through out time. Its spaces were lost in plan and section. The south arm of the original Latin cross plan was lost in order to widen the adjacent street. A second floor created when the building was the ministry of communications also altered the double height space inside.

My focus in this part of the conversion was to restore the Latin cross plan as well as the double height space. The roof was raised on the north side with new clerestory windows to provide more light to the space. Inside, four catwall vaults serve as a second skin. Woodwork machinery is enclosed between the old and new skin. Occupying the same place of the altar, there is a table saw. Behind it, a semicircular wooden closet serves as storage of tools and materials. Directly below the intersections of the four vaults, there is a template/ assembly floor. The main nave houses movable workbenches arranged like the pupils which once occupied the space. To the right, there is an abandoned train wagon that I converted in metal shop.