

RUESTA, A BEAUTIFUL REMAIN.

Ruesta, a beautiful remain in "el Camino de Santiago". Interventions on the French Way to St.James

DATA SHEET

Phase 0 Urban Restoration Masterplan of Ruesta

Years 2017-18

Team: SEBASTIÁN ARQUITECTOS SLP

Director: Sergio Sebastián Franco

Technical Architect: Pablo Sebastián

Architects: Alejandro Alda, Giorgio Bernardi, Ivan P. Martín.

3d Model: Aeroyud. Miguel Sobaberas

Structural engineers: Matute Manrique

Historian: Alex Garris Fernández

Other Collaborators:

Government of Aragon: Raquel Ornat, Marco Arruej, José Luis Cano

Urriés city council: Armando Soria

Hidrographic Confederation of Ebro river (CHE): José Antonio Piazuelo

CGT: Vicente Blanco

Promoter: Gobierno de Aragón (DGA)

Phase I Consolidation of Buildings along Camino De Santiago in Ruesta

Years 2018-19

Team: SEBASTIÁN ARQUITECTOS SLP

Director: Sergio Sebastián Franco

Technical Architect: Pablo Sebastián

Architects: Alejandro Alda, Giorgio Bernardi, Valeria Gasparini, Ivan P. Martín.

Topography: Aeroyud. Miguel Sobaberas

Structural engineers: Matute Manrique

Promoter: Confederación Hidrográfica del Ebro (CHE)

Builder: Damarim SL

Phase II restoration of Hermitages: San Jacobo de Ruesta/ San Juan de Ruesta / San Juan de Sigüés

Years 2019-21

Team: SEBASTIÁN ARQUITECTOS SLP

Director: Sergio Sebastián Franco

Technical Architect: Pablo Sebastián

Architects: Alejandro Alda, Giorgio Bernardi, Valeria Gasparini, Laura Martínez, Michela D'Angelo

Structural engineers: Matute Manrique / Javier Caamaño

Arqueology : Paleoymas

Historian: Alex Garris Fernández

Promoter: Confederación Hidrográfica del Ebro (CHE) / UTE Yesa

Builder: RubioMorte / UTE Yesa

Awards:

Hispania Nostra 2021

Trofeo Ricardo Magdalena Institución Fernando el Católico-CSIC 2020

Premio García Mercadal Colegio de Arquitectos de Aragón. Category Monument Intervention 2020

Accesit Gala de la Edificación Aragonesa 2021

Selected Project XIV Bienal de Arquitectura Española

DESCRIPTION

Those returning from Santiago travel the Camino twice. The first time to arrive, driven onwards by the excitement of travellers who undertake an adventure or the commitment of those with a promise to fulfil. The second time to return to where they came from, if this is possible, with the memory as baggage, both of what they left and what they gained on the journey. We usually only think of the going, but we should never dismiss the returning, since, from memory and the critical mind, we are invited to reflect on what we have just done, laying the foundation for a learning process that will eventually help us to see things differently.

The present text is a curious round trip, in which we will articulate a series of works of research and construction related to the restoration - understanding this word in all its breadth of meaning - of a land linked to the Camino de Santiago in the so-called empty Spain¹.



French Camino around the Aragón river reservoir in Yesa,

From the end of the 11th century, the cultural dimension of the Camino de Santiago went beyond the mere trajectory of a pilgrimage route to shape new landscapes and infrastructures, allowing the emergence of population centres, castles, walls, houses, streets, squares, markets, monasteries, cathedrals, churches, chapels, hospitals and fountains, under the patronage of Christian monarchs who intended to establish a repopulated trading area with its consequent cultural exchange, in a border area with Islam. The phenomenon of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela is recorded for the first time around 1140 in the *Codex Calixtinus*², and gradually declined until its virtual disappearance in the 18th century. But since the mid-twentieth century it has re-emerged as a cultural phenomenon, with a vigour and magnitude that has turned it into an Asset of Cultural Interest³. With the passage of time, many of these primitive settlements have fallen into oblivion and abandonment, leaving an important heritage orphaned and crumbling into ruin. This is the sad reality of many of our landscapes, where the structures that communities have built in the landscape, whether social, productive, economic or cultural, disappear with the departure of their last inhabitants.

¹ The term "empty Spain" refers to the mainly rural regions which, since the 1950s, have suffered a massive population exodus to the big cities. The term can actually be said to cover around 90% of Spanish territory. The Camino stretch that runs through the project area is part of the French route through Aragón that crosses the Pyrenees at Somport (or Via Tolosana), and then comprises a section from Jaca to Sangüesa along 80 km of a completely emptied Spain, in which all the villages have populations of less than 300 inhabitants: Puente La Reina (pop 260), Santa Cilia (pop 230), Arrés (pop 40), Mianos (pop 30), Artieda (pop 80), Ruesta (pop 1), Undués de Lerda (pop 70).

² El *Codex Calixtino* fl. c. 1140-1181 is the name of an illuminated manuscript from the 12th century containing the oldest text from *Liber Sancti Iacobi* (c. 1140-1160).

³ In Spain, the French route of the Camino de Santiago was declared a Historic-Artistic Complex in 1963 and included in the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites. It is catalogued as an Asset of Cultural Interest in the category of Historic-Artistic Sites (BOE07/09/1962), and its route has a 30m protection area on each side of the path's axis. Both the urban centre of Ruesta and the chapels of San Jacobo and San Juan, which will be discussed in this article, are listed as "associated assets" of the Camino de Santiago (BOA 20/07/2001 +23/09/2002).

But, paradoxically, today the Camino de Santiago can once again help to inspire the maintenance of these settlements, becoming the cultural and social spine of a land that is pitting its hopes on the revitalization of this almost millenary route in the fight against depopulation and as a means of conservation and protection of local heritage. The following works relating to the French Camino will be carried out in the area around the Aragón river reservoir in Yesa, specifically in the former municipality of Ruesta. The works carried out have made it possible to restore and maintain the passage of the Pilgrim's Way through this hamlet along the Calle del Centro, as well as the restoration of the chapels of San Jacobo and San Juan de Ruesta, San Juan de Sigüés, and San Pedro de Artieda, all organized in two master plans, one for the *Restoration of the town of Ruesta* and the other for the *Layout of the French Camino de Santiago through Aragón*, which have been executed in various projects and works.

Historically, the Canal de Berdún -as this stretch of the Aragón river valley is called- has been a natural strategic east-west connection route in the Pyrenean foothills, used as a settlement area by numerous civilizations, and for the Camino de Santiago between Jaca and Navarre since the Middle Ages. But the construction of the Yesa reservoir in the 1960s completely transformed this landscape, and entailed the expropriation of the village fields of Ruesta, Escó and Tiermas. Although the village centres were not flooded by the waters, the lack of means to sustain themselves forced the inhabitants to emigrate, and all the houses were left empty. This would cause not only a demographic and social decline, but also a decline in heritage, raising serious doubts about the protection of a wealth of cultural assets, prone to abandonment, despoilation, and the advance of natural recolonization.

The privileged position of Ruesta and its excellent communications system has always played an important role in this area historically disputed between the Muslim kingdoms, Aragon and Navarre. The first information available on this settlement is that it was founded as a *hisn* or Islamic fortress in the ninth century. During the war campaigns of Sancho Garcés against the Muslims in the 10th century, the settlement passed into Christian hands and would be called Arosta or Rosta⁴. Throughout the centuries the nucleus grew from the castle, acquiring its special physiognomy composed of four concatenated areas until it reached 100 houses in the 19th century⁵. After 1960 the 368 inhabitants of Ruesta departed, and since then the filming of the movie "La Vaquilla" in 1983 and the cession of the urban center of Ruesta to the CGT (Confederación General del Trabajo) union in 1990 have kept alive this dying area, being the pilgrims' hostel of Ruesta the only inhabited house in the village today.

The Ruesta hostel is currently in a very advanced state of degradation, due to factors such as the unstoppable growth of vegetation, seismic risk and, of course, human behaviour, both due to the lack of maintenance and the pillaging of significant elements that, once removed, produce mechanical defects in the buildings. All this leads to a situation of ruin, which grows exponentially day by day, creating a precarious situation, since the serious state of deterioration of the heritage entails important risks for the safety of the few visitors and pilgrims who come to the village.

4 P.MADOZ, Diccionario Geográfico Histórico de España; Huesca, Madrid 1849.

⁵ J.PASSINI, *Aragón. Los nucleos urbanos del Camino de Santiago*, Zaragoza 1988



Ruesta's aerial view

In this context, the General Directorate of Heritage of the Government of Aragon decided to promote in 2017 an *Action Plan for the restoration of the urban core of Ruesta*. Following the methodology of previous experiences in the drafting of master plans, and with the support of international collaboration agreements from the university academic field⁶, we developed the plan as a tool with the necessary measures to reduce these risks, but with a much broader scope, so that it would give us a comprehensive vision of Ruesta and the needs of future actions and interventions that could promote its rebirth and possible uses, coordinating the criteria of security with the conservation and protection of the heritage. Thus understood, the Ruesta master plan⁷ focused mainly on the following aspects:

- Firstly, in obtaining a general knowledge of the building heritage and its historical-artistic values through an exhaustive collection of data.
- Secondly, the analysis and diagnosis of the current state compiled by means of a system of cards and planimetries of each element and of the whole, and its comparison with the results of previous studies⁸. In this phase, the ruins were especially valued as a dynamic landscape, as an organism that can be altered by the combination of biological, non-biological and, of course, human factors.
- Finally, an action plan was drawn up as a synthesis of the two previous phases, in which a series of possible future intervention scenarios were proposed, which, through a realistic

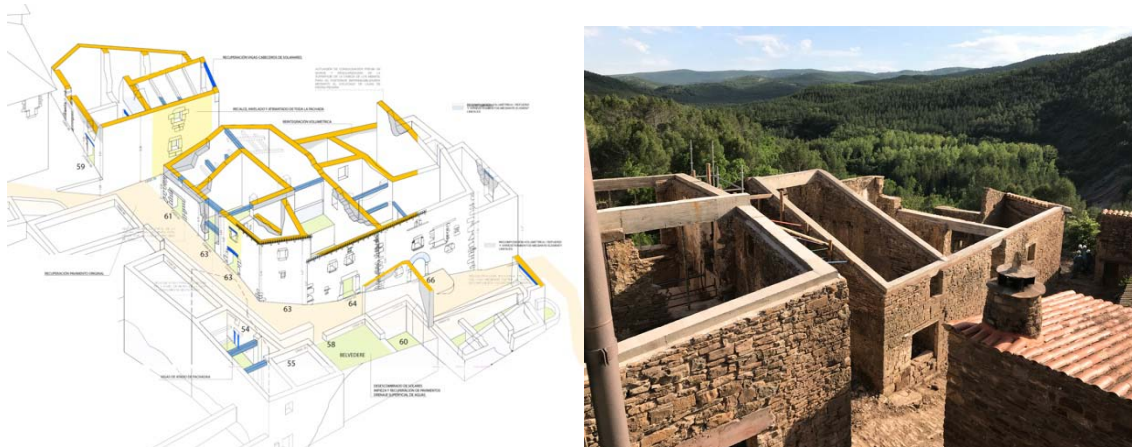
⁶It is worth mentioning here the significant contribution made to the master plan in its data-collection and analysis phases by the parallel development of the thesis of G. BERNARDI, *Análisis e riuso di Ruesta: un pueblo abandonato lungo il Camino de Santiago*, the result of the collaboration and the Erasmus agreement between the University "G.d'Annunzio" Chieti-Pescara and the University of Zaragoza, under the direction of Professors Claudio Varagnoli, Clara Verazzo and Sergio Sebastian, and which was defended in Pescara in April 2018.

⁷ For more information on such methodology, it has been published in detail in S. SEBASTIÁN, *Ruesta una bella rovina* in "ArchHistoR" Extra 7 (2020), and is based in turn on that defined in texts such as R. DALLA NEGRA, M. NUZZO, *L'architetto restaura : guida al laboratorio di restauro architettonico*. Caserta 2008 or in C. VARAGNOLI, *Experiencias con la reconstrucción en los Abruzos después del sismo del 2009: los centros históricos menores* in M. D'ANSELMO (a cura di) *Messico, Italy, restauro. Le Università di Città del Messico (UNAM) and Chieti-Pescara (ud'A) in venti anni di collaborazione* Rome 2014..

⁸ In 1993 the Official College of Architects of Aragon commissioned the architect Ramón Betrán to carry out an analytical study on the nucleus of Ruesta, similar to this writer's commission in 2017. This provides an interesting point of contrast, which allowed us thirty years later to assess the degree of abandonment of the village and the gradual deterioration of the buildings.

vision of the problem and the objectives, coordinate the work phases with the possible implementation of new programmes and the promotion of existing ones. The goal was to find a way in which the beautiful ruins of Ruesta could become architecture again: beauty, function, and constructive rationale combined together.

At this point, it was realised that the best way to guarantee the maintenance of the site was to get people to use it. Ruesta had shown us that rehabilitation needs space and time, but also the very need to inhabit. When there is no need, the time of inhabiting disappears and becomes the time of abandonment of this space that has ceased to have a meaning, to become archaeology, ruins.



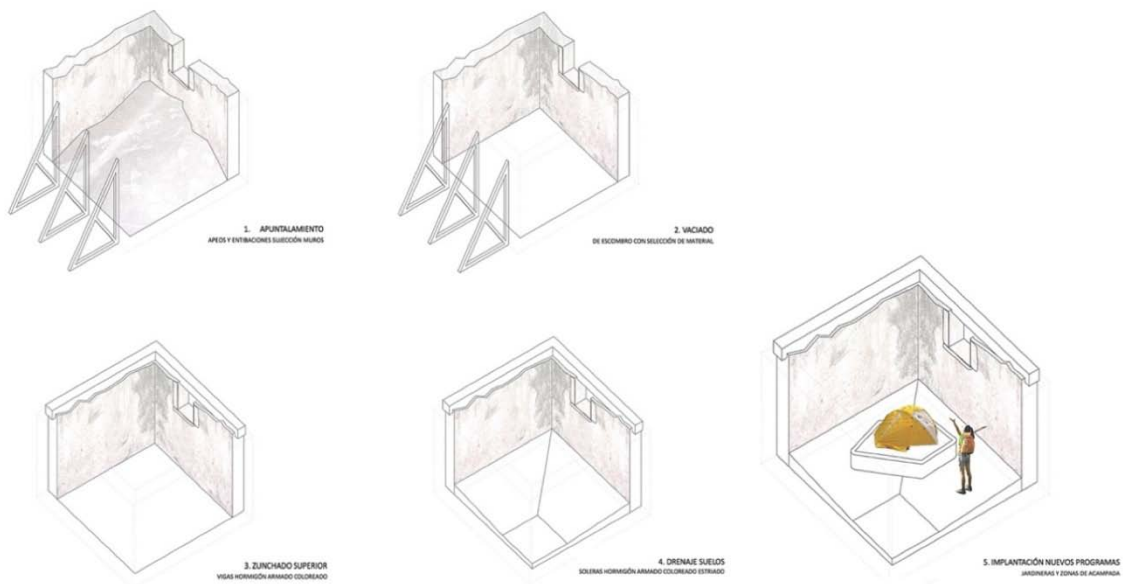
Ruesta's intervention

There have been many attempts made to encourage the restoration of ruins through the cultural activities of archaeological parks. However, in the light of previous experiences and the factors applicable to Ruesta, we believe that the fact of habitation would provide the utility and permanent protection that the ruin needs. To this end, it was necessary to seek ways to strengthen the relationships between the place and the community, which had been withering away during the years of emigration and abandonment, and which today, in order to prosper, will have to be very different from what they were. It would be sensible, in view of the fact that nearby villages are still emptying despite having basic services, to accept that the goal of rehabilitation needs a different vision linked to the new dynamics of tourism. It was not about physically rebuilding streets and houses, but about going beyond, and reinventing a community after abandonment according to the laws and guidelines of today's communities. The project, at this point, became more ambitious, seeking proposals that would shed light on one of the major problems of our region, depopulation.

Curiously, the solution was right there, in the passage of the Camino de Santiago. By chance, in 2017, the collapse of the choir of Ruesta's church motivated the Confederación Hidrográfica del Ebro (CHE), the owner of the village, to undertake for safety reasons the consolidation works of several buildings in the calle del Centro, where the Camino de Santiago passes through Ruesta.

The fundamental criterion for the plan we proposed was that it naturally assumes the state the ruins were left in, in its incomplete, asymmetrical, and fragmented condition, as a history stripped of its context. Ruesta was a ruin, and as such it had to be maintained. But it could be a beautiful

and useful ruin, presented with dignity. From this approach, the work that was defined was directed in three very clear directions: consolidation, evocation and occupation.



Ruesting

The consolidation was based on the premise of avoiding further degradation of the ruin as well as danger to visitors. To this end, a series of actions were defined consisting of shoring up the structures and clearing the rubble from the interior, and then protecting them with bracing and strapping, and the final drainage of spaces that were now empty and awaiting the introduction of new uses. Evocation relates to the symbolic character of the ruin, from its longing for permanence, to suggest that these consolidation works were also directed towards the remembrance of the previous urban scene, its streets and perspectives towards the landscape, as well as some symbolic elements such as windows or balconies, lost over time. The final occupation proposed that a series of non-invasive and reversible uses could take advantage of this new emptied and consolidated ruin without the need to reintegrate it or rebuild it in order to put it to use. Our proposal was to make a campsite among the ruins, which we called *ruesting*. From an approach of *albergo diffuso*, it could make use of the infrastructure of the pilgrims' hostel itself, so that light would once again shine out from the house windows of the calle del Centro.

The ruin could be transformed into a framework for new forms of dwelling, in a symbiotic relationship between host and guest. A frame to evoke the present and joyful instant that is joined

as a fleeting presence to the permanence of the ruin: Today, here, and now as our solution to yesterday and always. Ruesting is therefore a project of re-identification, which recovers a certain sense of context and community that was eroded by the exodus, and invites us to reflect on new ways of fixing our identity in place, letting the ruin shelter us once more, to become architecture again.

Going back to the "outward path", in 2001 a dam enlargement was proposed to increase the capacity of the reservoir, an operation that is still under construction. As a consequence, a series of compensatory measures were agreed upon for the affected municipalities, which will basically consist of modifying the Camino's route affected by the flooding and the restoration of some associated sites such as the previously mentioned chapels. In this context, a second master plan for the restoration of the Camino de Santiago in the Yesa area is proposed, promoted by the CHE in 2019, and whose scope is twofold. On the one hand, it must resolve the urgent issue of diverting and delimiting the new route of the Camino in the areas affected by the rising water, and on the other hand, with a much broader scope, promote the development and enhancement of this infrastructure, the associated assets, and the nearby municipalities, always with the ultimate goal of re-humanizing the Camino.

We saw in this situation an opportunity to solve both objectives with the same strategy: to make the Camino pass again through the municipalities of Martes, Mianos, and Artieda⁹, and, as already mentioned, to maintain at all costs the passage through the urban centre of Ruesta. This will help to revitalize these centres, to hold fast the population linked to the service of pilgrims, and to maintain the heritage as a cultural attraction. Yet, there is nothing new about this operation, the Camino de Santiago is a living route that, while remaining within general geographical boundaries, has historically modified its routes according to various events.¹⁰ The Camino is not so much a simple line but a land area.

The chapel of Santiago Apostle, also called San Jacobo, was erected at the beginning of the 11th century south of Ruesta and over the ravine of the river Regal. Its floor plan perfectly reveals the main construction phases. In 1055 a church of modest proportions was erected with a semi-circular apse and a nave. Worth noting in its interior was a transverse semi-circular arch set on two semi-columns with capitals decorated with mermaids, wolves and lions. As more pilgrims passed along the route, the monument's importance grew, which led to a notable expansion after the donation made in 1087 by Sancho Ramírez to the priory of Santiago de Ruesta, governed from the French abbey of Sauve-Majeure (Bordeaux). During the reign of Alfonso I (1094-1134), coinciding with the French monastery's apotheosis, new renovation works were begun, both in the chancel and in the cloister annexed to the chapel. There is no record of the reason for such works, but the constructive evidence obtained in the last restoration points to the partial collapse of the original church, whose nave was covered again with a barrel vault and the original apse was replaced by a straight apse, as well as the relocation of the original Romanesque doorway, motivated by the expansion of the chapel as a hostel or hospital for pilgrims due to the growing importance of the Camino's French route. Thus, it was necessary to extend the nave separated by a diaphragm arch, covered on two sides by wooden trusses, and side benches.

⁹ Currently the Camino passes through the bottom of the valley, in flood zones, leaving these villages perched at higher elevations than those they moved to in times of war. This distance means that pilgrims today do not go up to visit them or to ask for food and lodging.

¹⁰ It is very likely that the pilgrims took advantage of those routes that already existed for trading purposes or troop movement, so we could consider security reasons, provisioning, or rest, as is documented, for example, in the creation of the pilgrims' hostel of Ruesta in 1087, or the granting of charters such as to Artieda or the charter of Franks to Berdún in 1158, which led to the establishment of a market.



Chapel of Santiago Apostle

The archaeological findings obtained from the cloister, and the original apse, of an early medieval necropolis and of several minor annexed constructions, during the last works carried out, have transformed the initial impression of an isolated rural chapel to be presented in the recent restoration as the unveiling of an interesting monastic complex of some importance in the history of the French Camino de Santiago.

To the north of the village, next to the Yesa reservoir, is located the chapel of San Juan de Ruesta. We can say that -as architecture- it ceased to exist in 2001, when the carelessness of the administration drove the fate of this unique piece of the Aragonese Camino de Santiago into ruin¹¹. Renowned for having given support to one of the most important collections of Romanesque painting from the 12th century in the country; they were torn out in 1960 and are today exhibited in the Diocesan Museum of Jaca¹². Stripped of its use and its paintings, only a few frescos and the apse remain, of a volume that once stood out compact and powerful against the landscape of the Aragon River and the Sierra de Leyre. The ruin was covered with steel sheeting next to which was left an insolent pile made with the stones from its demolition.

Twenty years later, the restoration of the building has been carried out, approached from a critical point of view, and with the idea of recovering the image of this imposing volume presented against the surrounding oak and holly oak woodland, to provide a shady space for pilgrims to take a break on the Camino. Faced with the problem of reintegrating a volume of approximately 60% of the nave, the new intervention rests on the existing remains with an abstract and unitary language, a set of horizontal lines that, following the pattern of the original masonry and putlog holes, establishes a language that, within a certain material intonation, makes it recognizable. The roof slabs, in keeping with the vernacular building tradition, transfer their pattern to the façade, giving, as the only figurative details, an eave evoking the position of the original and a lost opening above the entrance, of which only photographic evidence remains. The stone ashlars on the facade continue the horizontal division, and open to the interior a delicate lattice of putlog holes that help to recreate the original atmosphere of the chapel, bringing in the half-light that this space had, centuries ago.

¹¹M.P.POBLADOR , *La agresiva intervención realizada en la iglesia de San Juan Bautista de Ruesta (Zaragoza), un bien del Camino de Santiago, declarado patrimonio de la humanidad por la Unesco*, in "Artigrama" XVI (2001) pp.559-575"

¹²A. BROSA, *The mural paintings of San Juan Bautista de Ruesta*, Barcelona 2019



Chapel of San Juan de Ruesta.

Outside, on the open space enveloping the chapel, today there is a memorial made with those stones from the demolition of 2001, which unfold like a relentless web that accompanies the pilgrim, bringing the memory of the artistic spirit they once had, and reminding us of the commitment to the legacy that we inherit and must ourselves bequeath. Heritage is our memory, a memory built by some and maintained by others.



Chapel of San Juan de Ruesta.

Today, as we make our return back to this land, we are able to affirm that the ruins of Ruesta offered us something open to interpretation, allowing us to approach its myriad histories by

moving backwards and forwards in the intricate line of different times and epochs that there intertwine, so that we could record our own moment. The new actions of consolidation, evocation and occupation were added to the previous ones, forming a new critical, continuous and non-hierarchical narrative.



Chapel of San Juan de Ruesta.

Ignasi de Solá Morales said "to intervene is to try to make the building say something again and in a certain direction (...) Intervention means interpretation"¹³. Intervening in heritage, therefore, is not only a matter of material, history, technique, or nostalgia, but it is also about understanding, through interpretation, a network of events that must be activated for architecture to live again. The intervention becomes a privilege of the architect but at the same time requires the exercise of responsibility. In our case, intervening meant saving the history of Ruesta from oblivion, and our work consisted of taking up an abandoned text and giving it another chance by writing a new story. Imagining time acting on architecture becomes a beautiful and useful exercise, and thus seen, Ruesta is finally presented as a time-spinning centrifuge that allows everyone who visits it to participate in this reality, which contains everything at once: the time of the old village of Ruesta, the time of abandonment, and the time of new opportunity.

¹³ I. SOLA-MORALES. *Theories of Architectural Intervention*. In "Quaderns d'arquitectura i urbanisme" 155 (1982).